

The Gospel According to Todd

By

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29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

John 20:29

## Chapter 1

A brilliant point of light beamed from the corner of the room. It grew steadily larger, glistening in vivid rainbow colors. They blended with one another in spectral chords, a sort of visual music. Gradually, the light organized into the shape of a man, dressed in a shimmering white robe. Just inside an aura of rainbow light was a radiant, unblemished face like a hybrid of all human races. The dazzling entity hovered momentarily, its luminous green eyes absorbing the fleshy commotion that was locked into the four dimensions of space-time. It refocused on the spiritual dimensions, fixing its intense gaze on the opposite corner of the room. It offered an open hand to the immortal soul of Jake Simon.

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Inside the emergency trauma room of Livingston Memorial Hospital, Dr. Todd Heller rhythmically thrust his weight into Jake's chest, feeling the sickening crack of bone and cartilage. Those flabby armed nurses should be doing this. But if the ribs don't break, you're not doing it right.

Todd blinked at the sweat gathered around his eyes and looked back to the clock. He crimped his lips tight and pushed harder on the chest, glancing at his staff as they worked out his commands. In pink scrubs and flesh-tone gloves, a nurse fiddled with IV tubing that fed into the top of a limp hand. A bleach blond tech held a respirator tightly around Jake's mouth and nose, squeezing the rubber bulb, forcing air into his lungs,

causing his chest to swell and shrink. Three other nurses and one dumpy girl from the lab stood by gawking.

“Come on, come on,” Todd said. “You can’t do this to me. I’m not done messing with you yet.”

Jake just lay there with oblivious, lifeless eyes staring up into space. His navy blue scrub top was scissored open to expose his pale, chubby gut.

Todd looked back to the clock. It was almost midnight. They were wasting their time. Jake’s pupils were shot, probably a brain bleed. Adrenaline did nothing. Epinephrine did not faze him, and the shock of the paddles was useless against his stubborn heart. Even if they did restart the heart, the brain was toast. Organ donation was all he was good for.

Todd gave one final shove and backed away. “Give it up, people. We’ve done all we can do.”

The respirator tech kept pumping air into Jake’s lungs.

“Sally!” Todd cleared his throat to soften his tone. “It’s no use. He’s gone.”

Sally squeezed off another burst of air and caused one last artificial swell of the chest.

“Doctor Heller, we have to keep trying,” Nurse Michelle said, her voice cracking with emotion. She was the best friend of Jake’s wife. “He’s going to be a father. We can’t give up now.”

Todd closed his eyes and rubbed at his slick temples. He opened them to meet Michelle’s gaze. “We’ve been at this for an hour. It’s no use.”

The bag of IV fluid slipped from Michelle's hands. It plopped to the floor and burst open at her feet. She whimpered and slid out of the room.

"You think this is easy for me?" Todd fell into the swivel exam chair behind him. "It's not like I didn't grow up with the guy."

The charge nurse named Jenny tapped a ballpoint pen to a clipboard. "Doctor Heller?"

"Sorry." Todd pulled his eyes away from Jake's unmoving corpse and focused on the clock. "I guess we'll call it 11:48."

"Twenty three forty eight." Jenny scrawled the time of death onto Jake's medical chart. "Anything else?"

"I could use a stiff drink," he said in jest. Nobody was laughing. Finally, after a long awkward silence, one by one the staff retreated from the room. Todd just sat there sorting sharp, mixed emotions.

It was unbelievable. Thirty years of messing with Jake summed up by announcing his time of death. As kids, all through middle and high school, Todd had enjoyed the sort of top dog banter with Jake that only guys could appreciate. Then after medical school, they just so happened to work at the same hospital. Jake worked the lab and Todd the ER. The scary part was Jake was only forty—Todd's age.

He leaned back into the chair and raked his fingers through his thinning hair. Could his week get any worse? First, his wife wants a divorce and now this?

He pointed an accusing finger at the corpse. "Now, do you see my point?" Todd said in a hushed voice. "How could your loving God let you die like this? And then screw me over on the same week."

Todd pushed off against the floor and rode the exam chair to the far wall on squeaky wheels. He stood and pulled out a short stack of blankets from a cupboard. He tossed them onto the floor to absorb the spreading IV fluid and pushed them along with his shoes, using up his valuable time to do a job he knew belonged to housekeeping. He grabbed another blanket to throw over Jake.

The sound of bitter sobs from the hall came closer to the door and then faded away again. He knew that voice. It was Teresa, Jake's wife. She worked as an ICU nurse upstairs. Todd had known Teresa in high school too. That didn't make this any easier.

Todd looked to Jake's corpse. "I have to hand it to you, Jake. You were a spineless wimp. You weren't the sharpest tool in the shed either. But you knew how to keep Teresa happy. Me, I'm heading for my second divorce. Nobody likes me. Everybody liked you. In my own sick way, I even liked you."

Nurse Jenny poked her head through the partially opened door. "Did you say something, Dr. Heller?"

Todd plucked a small voice recorder from his coat pocket and held it at her. "I'm dictating. Do you mind?"

Jenny huffed and slammed the door.

Todd draped the sheet over Jake's lower half. "Don't worry, Jake. If there is a Heaven—which there isn't—you won't have to worry about seeing me up there." He tossed the blanket over Jake's face. He stepped over to the door and paused. "Enjoy your nonexistence, Jake. Personally, I think you're getting the better deal."

Todd pushed through the door and found Teresa enclosed in the comforting arms of Michelle. Teresa looked up to Todd with those knowing, tear-filled green eyes of hers. Todd opened his mouth but nothing came out.

“I know, Todd. You did everything you could,” she said and sniffed. “I’ll be okay.” She pulled a lock of her curly black hair into place behind her ear. “He’s in God’s hands now.”

Michelle snubbed Todd and took Teresa by the crimp of her arm. “Let’s go outside, Teresa. You need some air.”

Perplexed by Teresa’s reaction, Todd watched them both leave. How could Bible-thumpers like Teresa cling to hope after something like this? More likely, she was just putting up a strong front for the bully who had pestered her husband all these years.

He started for the front desk. He caught sight of his soon to be ex-wife, Laura, a nurse on second floor. She came down the hall toward him with her shoulder length red hair clashing with pink scrubs. She had wanted to discuss something after work—right before she went home to their luxurious house. Meanwhile, Todd went to a cramped, furnished apartment. And what perfect timing she had.

Laura stepped over to him. She pulled her stethoscope from her neck, coiled it around her hand, and slid it into her pocket. She bit her lower lip as she measured her words.

“I guess you heard what happened,” Todd said.

“I can’t believe it. He was so young. *Your* age.”

“If Jake had spent a little less time on the couch and more time in the gym like me this might not have happened.”

Laura just shot him one of those looks and he knew to shut his trap. Maybe she was right. That poor sap was dead and he still took jabs at him. “I know, Laura. Old habits die hard. I really am trying.”

“You’re trying?” She averted her eyes. “It doesn’t matter anymore.” Small beads of sweat gathered on the tip of her freckled nose and she fiddled with the stethoscope in her pocket.

“What’s gives, Laura? What is this you want to talk about?”

“Did you know Teresa is pregnant?” she said. “They just found out right before he died.”

“Someone mentioned it,” Todd said. “But you’re changing the subject. You always do that.”

“This isn’t the place.” She gestured to eavesdroppers at the nursing station. “We’ll talk outside when you finish up.”

A few minutes later, Todd walked through the sliding glass doors of the ambulance entrance. He spotted Laura under the glow of parking lot lights. She leaned against her Honda Accord. It was double-parked behind Todd’s black V-8 Mustang, cutting off his route of escape.

What could she possibly want that could not wait until morning? He had moved out four days ago. Wasn’t that enough? Was she reconsidering the divorce? Maybe he could use Jake to play on her sympathies. It was a cheap shot, but he had to figure some way to get her back. Their separation was an angry, hasty decision. Maybe he could head this off before the divorce was final. Maybe a marriage counselor would help. He did love Laura, more than she knew. And Dillon—how could he go on without his son?

An ambulance pulled toward the ER entrance. Todd hurried out of the way and met Laura at his car.

“Sorry about that,” Todd said as he approached. “Duty calls.”

“I know, Todd. I still can’t believe it.” Tears gathered in the corner of her eyes. “I know you liked to pick on the guy, but even you’ve got to feel this.”

Good. She was sympathetic. He could use that. “I know. It’s tearing me up inside.” He leaned forward for a hug, striving to show affection.

She scooted away and gave him a wry smile. “Nice try. By the way, before I forget. Your mother called again. She really wants to talk to you.”

“Great. You’d think a restraining order would give her a clue. She’s not supposed to call me either.”

“She’s not dangerous anymore. She’s been out for twenty years and nothing has happened.”

“She killed her own baby son and then tried to kill me. I don’t care what the shrinks say, she’s not coming near me.”

“Your brother thinks you should talk to her.”

“The little brother I practically raised by myself? Thanks to dear old mom? How could he possibly know how I feel?”

“Todd, she’s got cancer. I think you should see her.”

“Why, so she can finish the job? Laura, my mother isn’t why you asked me out here. What’s going on? You want something. You need more money, is that it? Did that Mexican nanny ask for a raise?”

“She’s Columbian. You know that. And, no, she didn’t ask for a raise.”

“Good. All my extra cash is going into the practice. They’ll be finished with the building in July. Soon I’ll have a cushy day schedule treating sore throats and hemorrhoids. Maybe then I can spend more evenings with Dillon.”

Laura shifted nervously.

“Give it a chance, Laura. I really think I’d feel better if I didn’t work all these odd shifts. I might even be a little more, how is it you put it—sensitive to your needs?”

Laura shot him another one of her looks.

“Let me guess. That was insensitive.”

Laura didn’t answer.

“Laura, be reasonable. Can’t we just talk this over? If anything, for Dillon’s sake.” He leaned against Laura’s Accord. “How is the little guy, anyway?”

“Hopefully asleep by now.”

“Yeah,” Todd said and grinned. “He is a night owl, isn’t he? We better get his sleep fixed before kindergarten.”

“I’m sure he’ll adjust.”

“You know I hear they start little league football at six. By then I should be settled in my practice. I was thinking about signing up to coach. I could always get one of the other docs to take my call.”

“Todd, don’t.” She glanced nervously over at the flashing ambulance lights.

He pushed away from the car. “You don’t want him playing football? Let me guess. You want ballet instead.”

“No, Todd. It’s nothing like that,” she said and inspected her nails.

“Then tell me, Laura, please. What’s going on?”

“Look, I hate to drop this on you tonight, but I had to say something. I couldn’t just leave, just like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

She backed off a step and looked Todd in the eye. “The other day, when you moved out? You’re not the only one who packed their things. I’m moving in with my parents. Just until I find my own place.”

“Sorry?” Todd cocked his head, tilting his ear toward Laura. “Come again.”

“You heard me, I’m moving to Buffalo. I’ve already applied for my New York nursing license.”

“You’re kidding, right? This is a joke. You gripe about the winters here, in North Carolina.”

“I don’t have family here. I need support and my parents need me. They’re not getting any younger.”

Todd’s face warmed and he vigorously scratched his head. “What about me? I’m *family*.”

“Not for long.”

“Laura, please. Don’t do this. What about Dillon? I am his father.”

“Yes . . . and you had a father too. And you turned out just like him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? At least he put bread on the table. He only beat us when we deserved it.”

Laura sighed. “Now you defend your father? Now that he’s dead? Your father, God rest his soul, was a hateful bigot.”

“Just against Jews.”

“And now you’re just like him.”

“Laura, I’ll change. I promise. We can see a marriage counselor. I’ll get therapy. They’ve got great drugs now. I’ll even go to church with you. That alone should be enough to show you I’m serious.”

“Like when you went with us on Easter?”

“Yes, just like then, only every Sunday.”

“I remember that Easter well. It was the day divorce came to mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“You told Dillon the resurrection was a hoax.”

“Come on, I was just messing with the kid.”

“You once told me you wanted to go back in time and prove Jesus was just another preacher with a bag of tricks. He went too far and got himself killed.”

“That’s right. And then over time the legends started up.” Before Laura could respond, he held his hands up in surrender. “You’re right, Laura. I shouldn’t have said that. It was very insensitive. From now on, I’ll keep my opinion to myself.”

“Can you really do that, Todd? I won’t have you making Dillon doubt his belief in God.”

“Can I help it if I’m a skeptic? I’m a doctor. A scientist. I need to see proof. Show me Jesus walking on water and then I’ll believe it. I’m sorry, that’s just the way I tick. Love me or leave me.”

“I choose to leave you.”

Todd held his hands up again. “Alright, alright, I give. I understand your need to believe. I was wrong, okay? But that’s no reason to move to Buffalo. You hate snow. Come on, there’s got to be a better way.”

“You said it before. You don’t like strangers watching Dillon. My parents are going to watch Dillon while I’m at work.”

“Then why don’t your parents move down here? I can help with the move.”

Laura pulled her keys from her scrub pocket and went to her driver door. “I didn’t ask you out here to argue. I’m just telling you the facts. The moving van comes tomorrow. I just wanted you to know. You can swing by and see Dillon before we leave.”

Todd followed her to the door. “Laura, let’s go down to Ivey’s, have a couple of drinks, and talk about this.”

“Drinks? My child is with a babysitter and you want to go drinking?” Laura looked at her watch. “Maria must be getting worried. I need to go.”

Todd reached out and grabbed her wrist. “Laura, please, don’t do this! I can change. Don’t take my son away from me.”

“Ouch, you’re hurting me!”

Todd quickly let go. He would never knowingly hurt her. “I’m sorry, Laura. I didn’t mean to—”

“Save it for court. And forget about coming by tomorrow. You can call Dillon when we’re in New York.” She got into her car and slammed the door.

“Laura, wait! Don’t do this!”

She cranked the ignition and revved the engine. The tires barked as she pulled out of the parking lot, nearly hitting Todd's foot with the tires. She sped away and never looked back.

"Laura!" he yelled.

"I can change," he said to himself. He watched her car turn left at a stop sign and disappear behind the hospital. "Just give me a chance."

## Chapter 2

Todd gulped down the last ounce of beer. He brought the mug down hard on the counter and wiped his upper lip with his wrist. He glared at his reflection in the bar mirror for a long moment, his head swimming, his thoughts blurred by the hard buzz of alcohol. If he weren't such a coherent drunk, beer would have been more therapeutic.

He averted his eyes away from his reflection in disgust. He looked over to Larry, bartender and part owner of Ivey's Tavern. "She's right," Todd said. "I know she is. Dillon is better off without me. I told her I could change. I knew it was a lie the second I said it. People don't change. I've tried. It doesn't work." He fell forward, caught the edge of the bar with his elbow, and lowered his head to the red, padded edge of the counter with an audible thud.

Kids absorb everything. Every careless word fuses into their cerebral wiring, consciously and unconsciously messing up the kid for life. He wouldn't have Dillon growing up like himself. He wanted people to like his son. He wanted his son to be happy. And Laura too, for that matter. They were both better off without him.

Todd pushed himself up from the bar and sneered at the portly, bald barkeep. "Can't you see my mug's empty? Keep it coming."

"You really want to change," Larry said, "I'd start with Alcoholic Anonymous. You've had enough."

"Come on, Larry, I'm not an alcoholic. I'm a binge drinker. There is a difference, you know. Look, I've had a hard night. First, I lose an old friend, and then I lose my wife and kid. Cut me some slack, would you?"

Todd knew he was wasting his breath on Larry. He belched loudly, and swiveled around in his bar stool. There was a guy mopping the floor, but Todd was the only customer left.

He swiveled back to Larry. "Just one more and then I promise I'll leave."

"I don't get you," Larry said. "You're always talking about how long you went on the treadmill and how much you can bench press, yet you don't give a flip about your liver. Aren't you a doctor? You should know how many brain cells you're killing. Now why don't you let me call you a cab?"

"That's right. I am a *doctor*, aren't I? Not a very good one, apparently. I just let a high-school buddy of mine die. Some doctor. I should have followed my gut and gone to law school. A prosecutor. I would have been good at that."

Larry reached into the sink, pulled out a dripping beer mug, and dried it with a towel. “You don’t like being a doctor?”

“Would you want my job? Drug-seekers whining all day long. Me, me, me. Doctor, give me this, doctor, give me that. It hurts here, doctor, give me some pills. And just one mistake and they slap me with a malpractice suit.”

“Not all it’s cracked up to be, I guess,” Larry said. He set the beer mug down, pulled another mug from the sink, and started drying. “At least you make good money. Try paying the rent on what I make.”

“You want to see my student loan payments? Fourteen years later and I’m still paying them off. Try looking at my malpractice premiums.”

“If you’re so miserable, why not get another job?”

“And waste eight years of college? It’s too late now. I’m forty. I might as well bide my time and try to retire early. You know the crazy part is I never wanted to be a doctor in the first place.”

“So I gather. Why do it then?”

“Larry, take a good look at Freemont High’s Most Likely to Succeed. No autographs, please.” Todd held up his hand for effect. “I was also Mr. Freemont High, and captain of the football team. I had standards to live up to. I don’t know, Larry, why are you a bartender? It just seemed like the thing to do. Plus, my dad wanted to be a doctor. Got my mom pregnant with me and had to drop out to pay the bills. He never said it, but he resented me for that. So I became a doctor just to tick him off. To one-up him.”

“That’s sad, Dr. Heller.”

“Isn’t it? The really sad thing is I wanted to one-up my dad again. I wanted to be a better father. Until tonight.” Todd frowned thoughtfully. “You know, maybe it’s not too late. Maybe I could move to Buffalo too. The cold air could cool my nasty side. Maybe then Laura could stand to be around me.”

“It’s too bad about your son, Dr. Heller. I can’t imagine how that feels. But I’d wait till you sober up before you decide to move. What if once you move there she decides it’s too cold and moves back here?”

“Larry, you’re not helping.”

“I’m not trying to help. I want you to leave so I can go home to my own wife and kids.” Larry, wiped his hands on his apron, lifted up the phone, and set it on the bar next to Todd’s empty beer mug. “I know it’s rough, but getting plastered isn’t changing a thing. Now it’s past closing time. Either you call the cab or I do.”

“All right, fine. Tell the cab to meet me up by the ER. I left my cell phone in the car. I need to go get it first.”

“Done,” Larry said and picked up the phone receiver.

It was after two in the morning when Todd finally left Ivey’s Tavern and clumsily climbed the hill toward the hospital. He turned right off of Cumberland Avenue, avoided eye contact with a vagrant, and headed up 21<sup>st</sup> Street. He reached the top of the hill and was about to cross the street into the ER parking lot. Suddenly, a car screeched to a stop, blocking his path along the crosswalk.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Dr. Todd Kevorkian. I looked for you inside. But this is even better—out of reach from those slobs you call security.”

It was Eddie Simon, that acne pitted, flat-head Marine brother of Jake's. In the car was another Marine, also wearing a khaki uniform. Andrea, Jake's sister, a neurologist on staff at Livingston Memorial, was sitting in the back seat.

"Eddie, leave me alone," Todd said. "I did all I could."

Eddie came out of the car and stepped up to Todd, jutting his nose a few inches from Todd's face, forming horizontal slits with his eyes. The other Marine moved to Todd's rear.

Todd turned sideways and took a defensive posture between the two Marines who were trained to kill with their bare hands. "Alright, now, I don't want any trouble. I'm sorry about Jake, but I told you I did all I could."

Eddie jabbed his finger into Todd's chest. "Like hell, you did. How can my kid brother drop dead? Just like that? You always hated him, and you just happen to be his doctor. A healthy guy doesn't just drop dead."

"It was a brain bleed. It could happen to anybody."

Eddie leaned closer and sniffed. "You're drunk. You're stinking drunk! Is that why my brother is dead? Because you were drunk?"

That was a low blow. Todd clinched his fists and his face flashed hot. "I don't drink on the job! I'm off the clock!"

Eddie jabbed Todd in the chest again. "Then you let him die on purpose."

Andrea craned her head out of the back seat window. "Eddie, stop it! It's not his fault. Jake had high blood pressure he was too stubborn to treat. I've seen this before. It happens. Now please, it's been a long night for all of us. Just take me home!"

"Yes, why don't you?" Todd said.

“You watch your tone with me, Heller, or I’ll snap you like a dry twig. Something I should have done a long time ago, back when you were bullying my little brother in grade school.”

Anger boiled in Todd, clouding good judgment. “If you didn’t have backup, I’d let you try,” he said, thumbing to the other Marine flanking him.

Eddie winced at Todd’s breath and squinted at him like Clint Eastwood. Andrea stepped in again. “Eddie, let’s go!”

“Okay, Sis. Settle!” He waved her off. “She just saved your hide, Heller.”

“My hide? *Yours* is more like it. Now get out of my way.” Todd shoved Eddie aside and started across the street toward his car, snatching his keys from his pocket as he walked. He certainly was not waiting around for that taxi.

“Hey, what do you think your doing?” Eddie called after Todd.

“I’m going home.”

“Not like that, you’re not.” Eddie gripped Todd hard by the arm. “You’re drunk.”

“Get you hands off me!” Todd yanked his arm free and stumbled sideways across the street. A horn blared and tires squealed. He snapped his head around, just in time to see the blur of a Yellow Cab.

### Chapter 3

The assault of sunlight was a cruel slap. He squeezed his eyelids tight and brought up his arm for shade. Hangovers were bad enough in the dark. He'd have to get some thick curtains to cover those cheap apartment aluminum blinds. That rented mattress was no better than sleeping on the ground. He could almost feel hard lumps like rocks pressing on his spine. And where was his pillow? Probably on the floor. And what was that noise? Were those waves lapping against seashore? That's right. It was that noise gizmo he used to drown out daytime sounds when he worked night shift. He must have changed the setting to the waves. But this morning it sounded so realistic.

Todd slowly opened his eyes in the shadow of his arm. A bird squawked in the distance and he sat up slowly, eyes adjusting.

“That explains things,” he said and scanned the scene. “I’m dreaming. What did Larry put in my beer?”

A large, placid lake stretched out before him. On his side of the lake, grass and flowers in full bloom covered rolling hills spotted with trees and rocky patches. Browner, barren hills loomed at the far end of the lake. Two wooden boats with white sails bobbed gently in the distance. Men tugged on fishing nets, drawing them out of the water.

He found his footing on the rocky seashore and slowly rose to his feet. He looked down and his own body became the focus. An outer garment like a brown woolen cloak hung to his knees and opened in the front. Under the cloak was sack-like tunic with a V cut into the neck for his head. From the looks of the jagged slits that opened for his arms, the tunic was homemade. A crude leather belt held the tunic firmly to his waste. Rough sandals made of hardened cowhide were strapped to his feet. Curiosity egged him on. He hiked up his cloak and tunic and peeked underneath. At least this dream was consistent, not wavering like most. Sure enough, his Fruit of the Looms were gone. A white loincloth covered his crotch and wrapped around his waist, making him look like a skinny sumo wrestler.

Todd let the hem of his cloak fall and focused his attention on the lake. It seemed so lucid, so real. He even felt the chill of the air, smelled the fishy, wet odor from the lake. And he was inexplicably aware. How could he reason that a dream was realistic if he was only dreaming?

Panic surged and his heart hammered in his chest. Dreams aren’t in color. You don’t think to yourself when you dream. He pulled at the hair on his forearm and winced from the pain. You don’t feel pain when you dream!

He was suddenly aware of another pain—the burning hunger in his gut. He was famished, like he hadn't eaten in days. Had he been unconscious long enough for someone to move him and change his clothes? For how long? Last he remembered it was night, after two in the morning. He was arguing with Eddie.

“Eddie!” Todd yelled. His voice echoed off the hillside. “You did this to me!” Todd took off in a jog down the lakeshore. He frantically searched for clues. He stopped at a rotting log. “What did you do Eddie?” he yelled. “You knock me out and dump me here? Did Andrea drug me? Where’s my clothes, Eddie? And give me back my wallet you crazy jarhead!”

Todd breathed heavily, waiting for a verbal response, for Eddie to jump out from behind the bushes and yell surprise. There was only silence.

Todd scanned the scene for more clues. It wasn't Livingston, that's for sure. There was no lake in Livingston, only a river. North Carolina had much more trees. And it was almost cold. It was June, for crying out loud. How could it be cold?

A white fluttering caught his eye. He fixed his gaze on a distant hilltop. Maybe two hundred yards away, a lone figure stood, watching, wind whipping through his white cloak. He knew it. If someone went to the trouble of dumping him there, they'd hang around to see the result.

Todd cupped his hands around his mouth like a megaphone. “Hey! Eddie! Is that you? I want to talk to you!”

The ghostly figure stood motionless as wind undulated his layers of white robes. At that distance he couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling it wasn't Eddie.

Todd ran toward the man. He stumbled over loose stones, regained his footing, and looked up. He was gone.

“Hey! I want to talk to you!”

Todd jogged awkwardly up the incline of the grassy hill. He felt the sandals slip under his feet, the grass striking his bare toes, and the woolen cloak weighing heavy against his bare legs, until—“Ouch!” A small, sharp pebble had slipped into his sandal. He needed thick socks and hiking boots, not these nasty leather thong flip-flops. “A sick joke!” He bent down and dug the stone out with his finger.

Finally, he reached the crest of a hill and stopped. More grassy, sparsely treed hills stretched out before him, decked out with countless flowers in full bloom, tulips, lilies, and blood-red anemones. In the distance were grape orchards and plowed fields. Peasants toiled in brown earth. An ox pulled a plow as a man jabbed the beast with a stick. Other than the occasional shout from the field workers, it was strangely quiet, without the slightest of modern sounds, no airplane noise, not even a hint of a jet vapor trail in the sky.

He moved down the hill and found a dirt road meandering over the curve of the land. A donkey carrying a payload on its back loped down the path, prodded along by a towel-headed, bearded man dressed in layered rags.

Todd hurried up the trail. “Hey, buddy. You mind telling me where I am? And you don’t happen to know a guy named Eddie Simon, do you?”

The man’s eyes grew fierce and defensive. Without saying a word, he unsheathed a long dagger held in a slit on his belt.

Todd stepped back. “Hey, relax already. It was just a question.”

The man garbled something under his breath. He prodded the loaded donkey along with a stick and glanced back, keeping careful surveillance on Todd.

Todd yelled after him. "I just want to know where I am!"

The donkey bayed in protest as the man jabbed the ass harder and picked up his pace. He yelled unintelligible words Todd's way.

"Great, thanks a lot, buddy. Very hospitable."

Todd scanned the hillside. "Eddie! This is very funny. You can come out now."

Only the cry of a wild bird returned to him.

What kind of a sick game was this? Was Eddie watching from a distance, camouflaged like one of those army snipers with grass and twigs covering his uniform? He was probably on a hill taking pictures with a telescopic lens. Or was he actually holding a sniper rifle? Maybe Todd was set loose in this strange jungle so Eddie could enjoy the thrill of the hunt.

Todd found a boulder by the road and sat while his glucose-deprived brain churned for an answer. His immediate need was food. If he wandered into the wilderness without food or water, buzzards would feast on his entrails. That vagabond with the donkey was heading somewhere, probably some sort of third world village. The orchard and field workers supported his assumption. Maybe there was a soup kitchen or shelter, even a phone.

He got up and followed the donkey man down the trail at a careful distance, watching and thinking, scanning the hills for the glint of sun reflecting off binoculars or a sniper scope. But none of this made sense. Other than a sick thrill, what could Eddie gain by this? If he was upset over Jake's death, why not just do what every other American did

and file a lawsuit? He could sue Todd for whatever Laura wasn't about to take in divorce court.

On the other hand, could Laura's father have something to do with this? He had money. He could have done this to make sure Todd stayed away from his daughter. It was a long shot, but it wasn't any crazier than thinking Eddie was behind it. No, that didn't make sense. None of this made any sense!

That guy with the white robe held the key to all of this. He was the one spying from the hilltop. So where was he? He scanned the desolate hills as he worked down the path. There he was, on the next hill. He just stood there, watching, the sun glaring off that white robe of his.

"Hey!" Todd tore into a full sprint, his leather sandals slapping against dirt. His foot hit something slick and slid out. He toppled to the ground and landed hard on his behind.

"Auuugghh!" He waved away dust with his hands. He then smelled the cause of his slip. Wet, smelly donkey dung clung to his sandal. No time for that now. He refocused on the hill that he'd last seen the ghost. Naturally, he was gone, vanished into thin air—or hiding below the crest of the hill.

Todd clamored to his feet. He left the trail and ran up the hill toward the spot he'd last seen the guy. He approached the hilltop, hunched low as if it would give him the advantage of surprise. He paused to catch his breath. He suddenly sprang over the crest of the hill, fists clinched for a fight.

There he was, ambling down the hill toward a primitive lakeside village. It was almost like Todd was purposely being led into that village. What if it was an ambush? He'd better take this slow and study the situation before making any rash moves.

Todd took in the scene as he slowly descended the hill. The village covered maybe thirty acres and was surrounded by sectioned off farmland to one side. Fishing docks and sailboats were on the other side. Homes sat arranged in small clusters, made of black and tan stone with small square holes for windows high up on the walls. Some had stone fenced courtyards that corralled in goats, chickens, sheep, and donkeys. Others had stairs leading to the flat roofs with cloth awnings for shade. What stood out most was a Roman style building close to the lake, easily the tallest building in town, some sort of church or something.

It seemed safe enough, clearly a third world village filled with simple peasants minding their own business. Todd veered toward the part of town with the most human traffic, the shore of the lake. When he reached the edge of town, a mangy wild dog wandered past, stopping to hike his leg on a sycamore tree.

Todd strode cautiously down the cobblestone lakeside avenue, passing bystanders along the way. A strong fish odor saturated the air. Simple peasants milled about the streets in layered cloaks, headscarves, and sandals. Some carried baskets of fish or produce. Women seemed to prefer a light blue color cloak with bottom hems down to the ankles, while the men's cloaks came to the knees. Nobody wore pants.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of the white robed ghost and still less sign of modern civilization. He saw not one satellite dish, telephone pole, car, bus, or bicycle. It reminded him of pictures he'd seen on CNN or *National Geographic*. Some Middle

Eastern countries refused to conform to western ways and standards of dress. They believed western technology was evil. Maybe this was one of those backward Muslim countries. It wasn't too hard to accept. Just look at the Amish.

He walked over to the lakeshore and dangled his foot into the cool water to cleanse what was left of the donkey dung. Out on the lake, he saw more primitive fishing boats. On shore, fish were laid out on mats, drying in the bright sun. From the looks and smell of it, this was clearly a third world fishing village. But where on earth did they not have at least one car, some sign of modern life? Any minute he expected to see some kid running down the street with a Coke T-shirt, the usual handout from the wealthy nations. It was sad, really—to think that some people still lived like this.

Todd caught the attention of a burly, bearded passer-by. “Hey, buddy, any chance you know where I can find a telephone?”

The man eyed Todd oddly. “Tele . . .?”

“*Telephone*,” Todd said. “El telephono? Hablas Ingles? You speak English?”

“No, I have not heard this tongue,” he said in an odd accent. “I speak only Aramaic and Greek.”

“You're speaking it now, aren't you?”

“No, friend,” he said through crooked, plaque covered teeth. “I am speaking Aramaic. Is our tongue called English where you come from? If you will excuse me, I have come to hear the teacher speak.” He pointed toward a crowd gathering ahead by the lake.

Todd watched dumfounded as the man ambled down the lakeshore. “Aramaic?”

The man headed toward a fast gathering crowd. Whoever was attracting that crowd might be his ticket home. So Todd followed close behind. Once there, Peasants crowded in, enthralled by a speaker that stood just out of sight, shielded from view by the spectators. Some of the onlookers stood out. Instead of the modest rags for garments, two of the men wore multi-layered, colorful robes with fancy, gold lace for trim. Detailed tassels hung from the fringes. Hair hung down from under fancy head covers in greasy curls just touching the collars of their ornate robes. Their beards were wet with the same goop.

Todd mingled into the crowd for a better look, wincing from the sharp stench of body odor. Maybe it was a foreign aid worker handing out food. He could only hope.

“Excuse me, pardon, sorry.” Todd nudged and bumped his way into the crowd toward the front.

If he was a foreign aid worker, then he had to be literate and connected to the outside world. “Excuse me,” Todd said and plowed his way forward. He broke into the clearing. Cold water engulfed his feet as he stepped into the lake. “Great.” He backed into the edge of the crowd. “Thanks for the warning.”

In a tan robe and head shawl, a rather relaxed looking man in his early thirties stood on a wooden boat anchored a few feet from the shore.

Todd stood on his tiptoes and craned his neck for a better view of the boat’s contents. He saw no Red Cross rations. This guy was probably just a local politician or street corner preacher. Todd started to retreat into the crowd, but stalled, somehow drawn to the man. Maybe it was just the speaker’s disarming posture and expression. There was

an odd, calm confidence about him, as if he did not have a care in the world and he knew that neither should anybody else—that is, if they only listened to what he had to say.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed,” the man spoke in a soothing, yet commanding tone of voice. “As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.”

Farming instructions. Learning how to maximize crop yields wasn't going to help fill the hole in Todd's stomach now. He retreated into the crowd and worked his way back to the road. He started toward the center of town. Maybe there was some kind of embassy or police station.

“What kind of soil will you be, Todd?” a voice said from behind.

Todd spun around, ready to seize the speaker. All he saw was the backs of a hundred towel-headed peasants eagerly taking in their agricultural lesson.

“Great,” Todd said. “Now I'm hearing voices.”

## Chapter 4

Todd trudged ahead, past piles of stone protruding out into the lake to form primitive, yet effective piers for wooden boats with tattered sheets for sails. A guy sifted a pile of netted fish just off shore. He laid them out in the sun to dry, a crude means of preserving the meat. Todd cut right and ventured away from the lake and down a stone and dirt street. It was actually no more than a dirt path between randomly scattered stone homes.

A man with a tan colored headscarf exited a courtyard. He pulled a goat along behind him. Todd stepped up to the man. “Hey, buddy, uh . . . nice goat you got there.” He hated goats, but tried to be civil.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. “Just yesterday, I received this goat and two more like it for my eldest daughter.”

“Your daughter must be quite beautiful,” Todd said. “Listen, have you got a telephone? Or maybe you know where I can find one?”

The man tilted his head in a questioning slant. “Tele . . . ?”

“Telephone. You know.” Todd held his fist to his ear, pretending to be holding a phone. “Talkie, talkie? It has wires connected to telephone poles. Others are wireless cell phones.”

The man just stared, scrunching his brows.

“How about an embassy, a police station. Anything to get me out of here.”

“I am sorry. I do not understand. Are these Greek words you speak? I know only basic Greek.”

“Greek? No, I’m not Greek. I’m an American. Estados Unidos? Uncle Sam?”

“I have never heard of this land. Is it a province of the empire?”

“The United States isn’t an empire. It’s a country. Surely you’ve heard of America, at least seen one of our movies.”

The man stood dumbfounded.

“I’m an American citizen, you idiot! Now tell me where I can find the embassy!”

“You are mad! A demon has surely seized you. Away from me!” The man yanked the goat back. It bellowed in protest. He pulled the goat into the courtyard and slammed a wooden door in Todd’s face.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Todd said to the door. “I get that way when I’m hungry.”

Todd headed back to the lakeshore, the hub of village activity. He stepped over to a booth with an awning hanging over the front. Inside, a man shaved a wooden plank with a tool. Other planks lined the walls and leaned against a wooden table supporting

various metal tools. A boy dressed in a white cloak fiddled with a wagon wheel in the corner of the workshop.

Clearly, he needed a different approach. You attract more flies with honey than vinegar.

“Excuse me,” Todd said to the man shaving the wood. “Sorry to bother you, but would you know where I can find a phone? Maybe some Peace Corps workers? I’ll even settle for a missionary.”

The man wiped sweat from his brow and pondered the question. “I am but a simple carpenter. Your words are foreign to me. Perhaps you will find that which you seek in Tiberias.” He pointed down the shore of the lake. “It is a modern city, home to many foreigners such as yourself. Tiberias. I suggest you go there, friend. It is only fifty stadium from here.”

“Fifty what?” Todd said.

“A three hour journey at a steady pace,” the carpenter said. “Follow the shore. In two hours you reach Magdala. In another hour you reach Tiberias.”

“Three hours? On foot?” Todd pointed to his sandals. “In these things?”

“My cousin is a fine leatherworker,” the carpenter said. “For a price, he can fit you with far better sandals than those. His shop is just down the street.”

“But isn’t there a bus station or something nearby?”

The carpenter furrowed his brows and juttied out his lower lip. “Tiberias. This station you seek may well be in Tiberias. They have all the latest from Rome.”

“Fine, Tiberias it is.” Todd waved the carpenter off and started on his way. “The latest from Rome. I hope that includes Italian food.”

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Todd sat on a stack of freshly cut logs atop a wooden cart pulled by a mule. It meandered its way down the dirt road toward Tiberias. He'd caught the ride as he exited the metropolis of Magdala, which wasn't much different from the first town he'd come across. The people there were just as ignorant. Not one person familiar with telephones or the United States. And the demon possession comment came up again. Only it wasn't Todd they were accusing, it was overheard from an eavesdropped conversation. Apparently, some lady that lived there used to have seven of these demons.

The leader of a supply caravan had taken pity on Todd, explaining that a local itinerant preacher suggested that one should treat others as they wished to be treated. And it was a good thing. Blisters were already forming as he trudged along in his un-socked feet.

Unfortunately, the journey had so far revealed no clue as to his location. From the blooming flowers and cool air, it must have been spring. Being south of the equator would account for the difference in season. But wouldn't June be winter south of the equator? He could have been somewhere very north, perhaps Iceland. Maybe June was spring for them. But Iceland was civilized. They didn't cart their goods around on mule drawn wagons. Of course, there was no telling how long he'd been unconscious. But his muscles showed no signs of atrophy, which would be the case if he'd been in a coma for months. The only certainty was that he hadn't eaten in some time.

He topped the last view-obstructing grassy hill and Tiberias came into view.

Todd jumped out of the moving cart. “Thanks for the ride. This is my stop,” he yelled to the driver. The man raised a hand to acknowledge Todd but never turned around.

He stepped over to the crest of the hill. A stone wall of black and gray stones made a semicircle around the town. The unprotected side opened onto the lake, where several stone fishing piers jutted from the city and provided harbor for boats. The center was packed tightly with white stone buildings with orange tile roofs. The entrance opened up between what appeared to be two round guard towers built with white stones. Who built guard towers in the age of bomber planes? It looked more like a set from *Ben Hur* than a modern city. Only this town wasn't made up of backdrops, it was the real thing.

Todd sank to the ground and kicked his blistered feet out before him. If he'd seen just one sign of modern technology, he would have ventured into the town. That is if the guys guarding the gates, the ones holding long spears and dressed red skirts, would even let him into the city.

Just then, he noticed a commotion. One of the guards beat a man to the ground with the butt of his spear. The man scurried to his feet and fled down the stone paved road.

“What's going on here?” Todd's heartbeat quickened and his eyes burned with moisture. A *walled* city? Guys in red dresses with spears? Those guys looked like gladiators he'd seen in the movies—like ancient Roman soldiers, just like in *Ben Hur*. If it weren't impossible, he'd almost believe he was back in time. But time travel was just a fantasy. There had to be another explanation. Besides, the people spoke English. If he

were back in time, then why did they speak a language that was not yet invented? Maybe it was just some remote part of the world that liked to mimic ancient customs. But where? He'd been to college. He'd taken history and geography. In all of his perusals through the pages of national geographic, never did such a city appear.

Todd slumped back and laid on the ground as he pondered the possibilities. No rational solution came. And from the position of the sun, it would be getting dark soon. He hadn't a clue where he'd spend the night, let alone how he'd eat. Where was that ghost on the hill? That guy was key to getting home, yet he hadn't been spotted since leaving the first town. He had to stop wandering around and find that guy.

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The sun was just setting behind the grassy, sparsely treed hills when Todd found his way back to that first town he'd come across. He hobbled along, contorting his feet as he stepped in an effort to avoid pressure on raw blisters. His legs trembled with fatigue, his stomach burned with hunger, his mouth pleaded for anything wet. If he didn't wash his feet and put Neosporin on them, infection would surely set in. But if he didn't get something to drink, he'd never live long enough to die from infection. Clouds brewed over the lake. He might be able to get some rainwater, but he had nothing to catch it. He could drink from the lake, but he would prefer to not deal with an intestinal parasite just yet.

Todd stumbled across a young, short dude with pigtail ringlets hanging by his cheeks. He unloaded clay pots from an ox-drawn wagon and hauled them one by one into

a two-story building, some sort of inn or primitive motel. From the way that guy strained with weight, those pots were full of something liquid. Todd hobbled a littler closer to the wagon and knelt low behind a pile of hay the ox was munching on. What he was thinking wasn't right, but then again his whole situation wasn't right. Would that innkeeper guy freely donate some of that water? Not likely. Todd certainly had no local cash.

So Todd waited. Timing was key. He watched the man exit the structure, return to the wooden wagon, heft up another pot, then carry the pot inside.

It was now or never. Pain surged from his feet as he dashed to the wagon. He grabbed one of the smaller pots and scampered clumsily around the corner of the inn with contents of the pot spilling onto his hands. He paused once safely behind the building. He lifted the lid of the pot and carefully inspected the fluid before blindly guzzling the stuff. The liquid was dark tan in color. He sniffed carefully. Could it be? Another sniff confirmed it. It wasn't water at all. It was something even better—beer, exactly what he needed right about now.

Todd lifted the pot to his mouth and greedily gulped at the fluid. He quickly dropped the pot away from his mouth and cringed from the warm, bitter ale. "Nasty," Todd said and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. It sure wasn't Larry's cold beer on tap. Unfortunately, it would have to do. He tilted the pot and drank in a couple more mouthfuls. It wasn't that bad, really. It was an acquired taste.

Just then, thunder clapped overhead. He clutched the jar to his chest and limped around the corner of the inn for a better view of the lake. Lightning flashed. A deafening clap of thunder followed. Peasants scurried for shelter. A gust of wind spewed the spray of the first raindrops into Todd's face. The downpour would be next.

Todd hobbled down the lakeside dirt path, scanning the village for shelter, a doorway to hide under, an awning, something to keep him dry for the cold night ahead. He came across a small wooden stable. Inside a donkey and two flea-ridden goats chewed on hay and blinked away flies. It would have to do. Todd squinted from the rain-blown wind and made the last few steps to the stable. Suddenly there was silence. No wind, no rain, no thunder, nothing but the bay of the donkey.

“What the . . .?” He curiously watched the skies over the lake. Dark clouds loomed, but just hung there motionless. What kind of crazy storm just stopped, in suspended animation?

Todd looked the donkey in its bulging eye and gestured toward the lake. “You see that a lot around here?”

The donkey wasn’t impressed. He snorted and bowed its head into a feeding trough.

Todd stepped into scattered straw and stopped next to a post that supported the stable roof. He lowered himself to the ground and sat with his back against the post. He sniffed the contents of the pot, and then pondered the unmoving clouds over the lake. Was there more than alcohol in that pot, perhaps some exotic hallucinogen? He sniffed the beer again. It smelled okay. He took another sip. Nothing tasted odd—just bad beer that tasted better by the minute.

## Chapter 5

Something startled Todd awake. He heard it again—a snap, then crackling. Then he smelled it. It was a fire, and it was cooking food.

Todd came up too fast. A dull jab of pain punched his brain. He fell back into the straw as his head cleared. Then, carefully weighing his movement, he lifted a blanket that had covered him while he slept. Actually, it wasn't a blanket at all. It was a long woolen cloak, opened up like a blanket. Where it came from, he didn't know. It was the first pleasant surprise he'd had in a while.

He tossed the cloak aside and gradually brought his head vertical. He carefully stood and steadied himself against the support post, testing the severity of his hangover. It was bad, but he'd had worse.

He glanced down at his sandal-laden feet. A shock of clarity struck. How could it be? Yesterday, his feet were raw with bleeding sores. Now he stood without a hint of pain. He pulled a sandal off and examined his foot. The blisters had completely healed with tough calluses in their place. Had he again been unconscious for days? If not, then why were they completely healed?

Saliva made a puddle in his mouth, his glands alive from the smell of grilling meat. He slid his sandal on and sniffed greedily at the smoke. He'd ponder his miraculous healing when his stomach was full. Besides, what could be more bizarre than his being in that stable in the first place?

Todd followed the smell into the street. There, in a small clearing between buildings, a man in a gray cloak held a pan over a small fire. He jostled the contents for even cooking. The guy wasn't that tall, maybe five ten. Todd could take him in a fight if things got ugly. Only this guy didn't look like the fighting type. He had more of an English butler demeanor about him. His perfectly erect posture and the almost gliding movement of his hands suggested he was too sophisticated for a petty brawl over fish.

Todd cautiously stepped over to him, unsure of what he intended to do. He was a physician, for crying out loud, not some homeless panhandler. Still, survival came first, pride later. "Hey, buddy," Todd said, eyes fixed on the pan. "Any chance you feel like sharing some of that?"

Without a word, the man gestured to the ground next to him.

Todd sat Indian style next to the fire. "Any chance you've got a cell phone?"

The man just grinned and handed Todd a small flask. "It is milk. Drink it all, if you like. You look famished."

Todd snatched the flask, but sniffed it cautiously before drinking. It smelled like milk. He took a slow sip. It was warm, but tasted okay. He turned the cup up and finished it off. It soothed the yearning ache in his stomach.

“Goat’s milk,” the man said.

Todd cringed. He hated goats, but at this point, he’d ignore his disdain for the bearded beasts. “Mmm, tasty. And what’s that, fish?”

The man handed Todd a dish covered with white, shredded fish. There was a pancake-sized piece of cracker-like bread next to the fish. “Try some. I have already removed the meat from the bones.”

Todd took the plate shoveled the meat into his mouth with dirty fingers. His immune system would understand the breach in hygiene. As he chewed, he studied the odd character that had just shown unusual kindness. He wore no head covering like most men. His dark, wavy hair had a perfectly centered part down the middle, causing it to fall to the sides and rest on his shoulders. He had a short, neatly trimmed beard, and with his semi-tan skin, slightly flared nostrils, and mildly Asian looking slants of his eyelids, he looked to be a mix of all the Earth’s races.

When Todd had nearly finished his meal, the man met Todd’s eyes and spoke in a smooth, baritone voice. “If I want you to drink, I have you come thirsty. If I want you to eat, I have you come hungry. If I want to show you the truth, I break your pride. For in accepting the truth, you must first admit that you are wrong. I let you wander this land hungry to break your pride. You see, you asked me for food. You are not too proud to beg.”

Todd slowed the pace of his chewing. “Come again?”

“You walked quite a distance yesterday. The cloak you slept under last night belongs to my master. Some say that by simply touching his clothes one can be healed. Tell me, Todd, how do your feet feel today?”

Todd dropped the plate, spilling the last bit of fish onto the ground. “You! You were that guy on the hill, the guy with the white cloak. You’ve been watching me!”

“Yes, that was me in the white cloak yesterday. In the course of my duty, I have worn many cloaks.”

Todd balled his fist. He wanted to deck the guy, but violence would not get him the answers he needed. “Alright, what gives? Who are you and why am I here? Did Eddie put you up to this?”

“No, Edward Simon was not involved. It was Edward’s younger brother that asked me help you.”

“His brother? Are you talking about Jake Simon? He told you to do this before he died? That’s absurd. Why would he do such a thing?”

“No, not before he died. After he died.”

“After he died?” Todd clinched his teeth and shut his eyes, mustering every ounce of lingering patience. “Alright, joke’s over. Tell me who you are and how I got here.”

“My name is Eleazar. I work under the supervision of arch angel Phanuel.”

“Eleezer? What kind of crazy name is that?”

“Where I come from, I have another name. However, the human tongue cannot pronounce that name.”

“Okay,” Todd said with hiked brows. “This just keeps getting weirder by the second.”

“Just call me Eleazar.” He pronounced the name slowly. “EL-E-AY-ZAR. It is a common name among these men. In Hebrew, the name means ‘God has helped.’ I am here to help you.”

“Help me? Really? By dragging me to this backwater, third world town?”

“You were not dragged here at all. It is not feasible to move matter across time. However, the spirit is outside of time. It moves along the timeline freely. Your original body still lies in a coma at Livingston Memorial Hospital. Using your genetic code as a blue print, this body was fashioned from elements in the soil and water from the Galilee. God transferred your spirit into this body. Naturally, your stomach was formed empty. My apologies for that, but there was a purpose. Nothing God does is without purpose.”

Todd stared at this nut, dumbfounded by the lunacy spilling from his mouth. “So let’s get this straight. You expect me to believe that God made a whole new body for me and moved my soul into it?”

“That is correct. And just as God made Adam naked, so he made you. It was I that clothed your naked body before it came alive.”

“My *naked* body?” Todd snatched the metal plate from the ground and slung it at Eleazar, striking him on the chest. “You stay away from me, pervert!” He went to his feet and stalked away. He stopped and turned back to Eleazar. “You’re crazy, you know that? You’re slam out of your mind!”

Eleazar just sat there, carefully plucking flakes of white fish from his robe.

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Todd wandered the narrow alleys that cut between mud brick and black basalt stone homes, still looking for a payphone, some sign of civilization. The smell of fish and manure permeated the air. Livestock bayed and children laughed as they played in the stone-fenced courtyards.

Anguished wailing caught his attention. Morbid curiosity prodded him up the street toward the sound. When he came to an intersection, he found the source of the ruckus. A melancholy dirge emanated from two men huffing on wooden flutes. Women dressed in dark cloaks and veils lamented in exaggerated sobs. As a doctor, Todd had experienced genuine grief daily. These women were faking. With such loud and deliberate weeping and sobbing, it was as if they mourned for a living—the greater the grief, the bigger the tip. Standing just outside the door to a home, several other women stood weeping. Their grief was genuine and it sickened Todd to see it.

Some guy dressed in a coarse tunic that looked like it was woven from animal hair stepped onto the scene. He moved to center stage and ripped open the front of his tunic. He pounded his fists against his hairy chest, howling in agony.

A dirt-smudged, snaggletooth beggar came up to Todd holding out a dented metal cup. “Alms for the poor,” he said in a pleading tone. He bent his filthy face into his best pity-evoking frown.

“I wish I could give you alms,” Todd said. “Unfortunately, my pockets are emptier than my stomach.” Todd motioned to the wailing women. “So what’s going on here?”

“It is the daughter of Jairus, ruler of the synagogue,” the beggar said. “She had been ill, but now it seems she has died. Just moments ago, so I am told.”

“You sure about that?” Todd said. “Has a doctor pronounced her dead? Sometimes people look dead when they’re really in a coma. In the old days, people would wake up in their graves.”

“Stranger, I know nothing about these things,” the beggar said. “But there is surely no physician in this village, unless he be a passerby.”

“That, I can believe,” Todd said as he surveyed the queer scene. Even if he wasn’t being reimbursed by Medicare, common decency and the Hippocratic Oath demanded that he help. Maybe he could barter his services for one long distance phone call and a good meal. That pinch of fish and swig of goat’s milk did little to satisfy the gnawing in his gut. “Actually, you happen to be talking to a physician now. Let me see if I can help. All I’ll charge is a good meal and a telephone call.”

The man eyed Todd suspiciously, apparently wondering why a doctor would wear clothes similar to his own rags. “Even if you are not a physician, you can certainly do the girl no harm now. Come, I will take you. Under the condition that you share any meal received with me.”

“Deal,” Todd said. Half a meal was better than no meal.

The beggar took Todd by the arm and ushered him through a gate that led into a private courtyard, where the genuine grievors had gathered to weep.

“Wait here,” the beggar said. He went up to the door and knocked.

Todd stood waiting and watching. From the looks of the place, with its smoother cut stones and ornate trim around the thick door, the owner of the house had some bucks, relatively speaking. If anybody had a telephone, it would be him. His luck had finally started to change. How convenient to have the rich man on the hill’s daughter die just

when an American trained physician happened to walk by. He just hoped he could do something to win a favor. But how? He had no medical instruments, no drugs, nothing but his dirty hands.

The door to the house opened. A young guy wearing a red robe with colorful fringes answered the door and listened to what the beggar had to say. With a nod from the fancy-robed young man, the beggar turned to Todd. "Come see what you can do."

Todd followed the young man into the house while the beggar stayed outside. Several more people were in the house engaged in hushed, anguished conversation. A fancy rug was on the floor. Nice, but unless it was a flying carpet, it was useless. Oil lamps hung on the wall, but other than that, there was no evidence of modern fixtures, certainly no telephone.

"She is there," the young fellow said. He pointed to the floor in the corner of the house.

Todd moved toward the girl, uncertain if anything could be done, even if he did have medicine. CPR would only sustain oxygen to the brain for a short time until they could shock her heart back to life. He needed an IV, adrenaline, epinephrine, a host of other drugs, but he had nothing but good intentions.

Todd knelt down by the girl. Illuminated by light that streamed in from lattice-covered holes in the walls, she lay on the floor on top of a thin mat that served as a mattress. She looked to be twelve or thirteen years old. Her black hair was pulled back in a weave. Unfortunately, her most striking features were her ashen colored skin and bluish gray lips. Todd reached for her wrist and felt for a pulse. She was already cold to the touch, yet her arm moved freely. Rigor mortis had not set in. He held her wrist and

focused, trying to concentrate over the sound of wailing women. There was no pulse. One last thing could be done.

Todd motioned to the young man in the fancy robe. “Do you have a mirror?”

“Of course,” he said. He went to a square cubbyhole built in the wall and riffled through some things. He returned promptly holding a gold colored metal plate with a reflective surface. It wasn’t what Todd was expecting, but it would do.

Todd took the gold plate. “How long has she been like this? When did she stop breathing?”

“Since just after sunrise,” the young man said.

Todd looked at the angle of the light streaming through the window. It was at least two hours past sunrise. That wasn’t good. He held the mirror to the tip of her nose and waited. There was nothing, not a hint of fog. She was dead. From the young man’s account of the time of death and from the temperature of her wrist, she was far too gone for CPR. Her brain was already mush.

Todd stood and handed the mirror back to the young man. “I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Yes, I feared as much,” the young man said. “But father has gone to retrieve a great healer. Perhaps he can help.”

“He can do nothing,” Todd said. He hated to be so rude, but as soon as acceptance set in, the sooner healing could begin. “I’m sorry, nothing can be done,” he said again and walked to the door.

Todd stepped into the courtyard and started toward the gate that led to the street. Oddly, where there was exaggerated wailing before, now there was cackling laughter.

That kid in there was dead, and these people were laughing? What kind of people would do such a thing?

One of the women yelled, “She better not be sleeping. I don’t get paid to mourn sleepers!”

Again, the crowd broke into laughter.

The gate to the courtyard opened. In walked that charismatic agricultural instructor Todd had seen speaking to the crowd from a boat—the guy who had talked about increasing crop yields. From the way the crowd was laughing, the speaker apparently had a good stand up act as well.

Todd stepped aside as an older man, also dressed in a fancy red cloak with decorative fringes, passed by Todd, leading the speaker from the lake into the house. Three other young, bearded men followed closely behind.

Todd stood in the courtyard and curiously waited. Could this be the healer that the young man had referred to? If so, he was wasting his time.

A moment later, the door opened up and all those who were in the room, three weeping women and the young red-robed man, stepped out into the courtyard. Todd would have left, but he was too intrigued by this speaker-healer. A few moments later, the door opened and the speaker-healer exited with his three friends following close behind.

“Thank you!” the red robed older man called from the door. “Thank you! Praise be to God in the highest. Thank you!” He ushered the weeping women and young man back inside and closed the door.

Speaker-healer and his entourage joined the crowd outside. They clamored around speaker-healer like he was a rock star. Several other men then joined the first three men and surrounded speaker-healer to shield him from the crowd. Like bodyguards ushering Elvis to his waiting limousine, they fought back the crowd as they moved down the narrow street and out of sight.

Todd stood there scratching at his dirty blond hair. He clearly overheard laughter coming from the house. He turned and glared at the door in disgust. “What are those people so happy about?” Todd said to himself. “That girl is dead and they laugh?”

Todd pounded on the door. One way or another, he was getting to the bottom of this.

The door flung open and the happy older guy with the fancy red robe stood in the doorway.

“What happened?” Todd asked. “That girl in there is dead and you thank your God? What kind of barbarian are you?”

The smile faded from the man’s face and the wheels in his head churned for an answer. “She, uh, she was not dead after all. She was simply asleep and we thought she was dead. That is why we are happy.”

“No, she’s dead. I checked her myself. I assure you she was not sleeping.”

“Please, sir, do not continue this way. He asked us not to say anything. After what he has done for us, I will certainly obey. Please, sir, go and leave us in peace. She was only sleeping.”

“Like hell she was!” Todd pushed his way into the house.

And there she was, sitting up and chewing on a big, round cracker, all smiles and giggles.

## Chapter 6

The setting sun warmed Todd's back as he sat on a hill overlooking the primitive village he'd spent the day exploring, looking for some semblance of the twenty-first century. He'd also looked for this speaker, healer, comedian, and now magician. He'd walked every passage in town and up and down the shore. He just couldn't shake the image of that grinning little girl eating that big cracker—the girl he'd moments before pronounced dead. Most likely, it was an elaborate hoax. She probably had a twin sister. It was a sick hoax to be sure, but it must have been one all the same.

Still, if there was just the slightest chance it wasn't a hoax, then as a physician, Todd owed it to the world to find out this healer's secret. Had this mere peasant discovered a miracle herb that somehow restarted the heart? Could it regenerate brain

cells? But this healer was nowhere to be found. Finally, after questioning several people, one man had admitted the healer had gone back to his hometown, wherever that was.

“The girl had a twin sister,” Todd told himself. “Just a sick joke, that’s all.”

He glanced over to his left. A snowcapped mountain loomed in the distance. The sun set on his back so that mountain was north and Tiberias was south. That’s all he knew. He’d asked where he was. Capernaum was all anyone said. And that crazy pretty boy named Eleazar had vanished again. He was nowhere in town and nobody he’d asked had ever heard of the guy. He even saw a couple of those guys dressed in red skirts, like the ones he’d seen beating that poor sap in Tiberias. He was not an expert, but they also looked a lot like pictures he had seen of ancient Roman soldiers. But that was impossible because time travel was impossible.

So there were only two reasonable explanations. He was completely out of his mind or this was a reality show and everything around him was part of the show. Todd was the unwilling star of that show. If so, the production budget must be huge to build three towns and hire all those actors. Unless, of course, he considered his third, less reasonable scenario—aliens had abducted him and this was their home planet, which was in an alternate universe that looked like ancient Earth. He liked the reality show idea better.

The sun slipped behind the hills, taking its warmth with it. Campfires and torches sporadically appeared in the village below. If he hoped to put another morsel into his yearning stomach, he’d better start moving. Maybe he could pull scraps from the teeth of a wild dog, anything to quiet the pangs in his gut.

He made a careful dissension down the hill. He followed a path toward the warmth of a campfire he'd seen glowing in a field next to the village. He carefully moved in closer to the fire, testing the group of men. They were so deeply drawn into a discussion that they hardly noticed Todd rubbing his hands by the fire.

“Yes, the healing of Jairus’ daughter was amazing, indeed,” one of the men said as he gripped a crude crutch. “But I also heard that he healed a centurion’s servant. Yet, he never even saw this servant. His power travels outward and away from him.”

“A centurion? A Roman?” another man said in disgust. “How can he stoop to helping a Roman? A *pagan!*”

“Perhaps the servant was a Jew,” another said.

The appalled man just huffed and darted his eyes away from the fire.

“Yes, but he has healed many others as well,” the cripple with the crutch said. “He even casts out demons.”

“There was a wedding in Cana,” said a short dude with an extreme under bite. Two protruding buckteeth that made him look like Bugs Bunny. “It is said that when they ran out of wine, the rabbi turned pots of water into wine,” Bugs said. He made a whistling sound on the S’s. “Good wine, not like this ssswill.”

Todd knew that wine was better than they were letting on. The way these men were ranting about miracles, they were all clearly drunk—which is what Todd needed to be. “I’ll take some of that swill if you don’t want it,” Todd said.

“Certainly, have some of this fine wine,” Bugs said, handing Todd a clay jar with narrow pouring spout.

“You gave wine to a *Gentile?*” said a man with an eye patch.

“Have you tasted that wine?” Bugs said. “It is only fit for dogs.”

“Fair enough,” Eye Patch said. He tossed a dried out slab of manure into the fire. The fire spat and popped in gratitude, dancing in the gentle wind.

Todd brought the jar to his lips and took a long swig. He squinted as a chill shot through his body. “Aaauuooo, man! This *is* bad wine.”

“We save that wine until last,” Bugs said and chuckled. “That way we are too drunk to care what it tastes like. If you can tolerate the wine, drink it all. For I am not nearly drunk enough to enjoy it.”

“Thanks,” Todd said. He tilted the jar back and took another, longer swig. It wasn’t that bad. At least he could taste the alcohol.

“Brothers, these miracles you speak of are impressive,” said a turban-headed man with a large staff. “However, they pale in comparison to what I have to share. Last evening we took my brother’s boat and followed the teacher’s boat to the other shore. Suddenly, a fierce storm struck us. I was certain we would all drown. But it was not to be so. With my own eyes, I witnessed the teacher stand upright in his boat. He waved his arms in the air. As soon as he did this, the storm ceased. The sky was calm as you see it now.”

The other men grumbled over this. Todd rejected the notion as absurdity.

“Sir,” Todd said, “you are out of your mind if you believe that. My guess is last night you were drunk as you are now.”

The man gripped his staff tightly and rose from the ground. “Stranger, I suggest you leave before I use *you* to kindle this fire instead of ox dung. For at this point, I can see very little difference between you and the dung.”

The other men broke out in laughter, but the man who'd spoken the words wore a serious, scorned expression. He gripped the staff with both hands and took a step toward Todd.

"Take it easy," Todd said. He backed away from the fire. "Can't you take a joke?"

Todd slipped away without being followed by that staff-baring barbarian. He carefully followed the light of torches into town. With any luck Eleazar's cloak was still in that stable. He felt the chill of a cold night already. He found the stable with relative ease, since he'd passed it twice in search of the miracle worker, the man who now controlled the weather. He entered the darkened stable with the smell of burned manure still clinging to his clothes. Now the smell of fresh manure permeated the air. He felt around with his feet, sifting through the straw for the cloak. It wasn't there.

"It figures." Todd lowered himself into the straw. He leaned against the support post and heaped straw atop his body to stay warm. "If Laura could see me now."

It was that time again—to numb his pain, to blur his pointless reality. He snuggled against his favorite liquid bedtime pillow, lifted the spout of the wine jar to his lips, and finished the last disgusting drop.

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"Ouch! Hey, what the—"

Todd swatted at his head. He smacked the snout of a hungry, bug-eyed goat that made breakfast of his hair. He rolled away from the beast, resting his backside in something warm, wet, and smelly.

“Oh, this is just perfect!” He rose to his feet, gaping down in revulsion at the steaming, squashed pile of donkey dung that swarmed with flies. Half the dung adhered to the backside of his tunic. Flies took an instant liking to him.

He swatted at the flies as his head swam, clinging to the support post to keep his balance, steadying himself against another hangover. He scooped up a fistful of straw and used it to wipe the wet dung from his backside. He only spread it further down his cloak. “It just keeps getting better and better.”

He stepped backward. The dull pain of a stone pressed against his bare heel. He stared down, eyes fixed in horror. “My sandals!”

Todd frantically scanned the floor for his leather thongs. Without them, his feet would be cut to shreds on the rocky terrain. He went to his knees and sifted the straw, moving along the ground on all fours. His head butted against a goat. He found his sandals—or what was left of them—strewn about on the ground in soggy pieces. Another spotted, horned goat was working away at the soles.

“No, no, no, no, *NO!*”

Todd clutched his sandal’s sole and pulled hard against the goat’s toothy grip. “Naaaaaaaa,” the goat bellowed and let go.

Todd fingered the slimy hard leather sole and then picked up the other sole, which lay on the dirt floor. That filthy, bearded beast had devoured the soft leather straps and turned the soles into chewed up mush.

“If I had a knife,” he said to the bug-eyed beast, “I’d skin you alive and use your hide for new sandals.”

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Todd plodded along the dirt streets in his brand new sandals. It took some pleading, but the town leatherworker finally agreed to fit Todd in a new pair of sandals in exchange for the wine bottle he'd been given at the fire the night before.

He came to a corner street and stopped in front of a building with metal lattice on the windows. It looked to be a primitive jail cell. Two of those so-called *Romans* he'd occasionally seen around town stood in front of the building talking to the buck-toothed Bugs Bunny looking guy who'd graciously given Todd the wine the night before.

Todd eyed these two soldiers warily, peeking from around the corner of the building. They were both dressed in red shirts and skirts. The younger of the two wore metal shoulder pads and a shiny helmet. He carried a long spear and a sheathed sword. The older guy wore no helmet and had short cut hair with bangs and a big scar on his cheek. He wore chest armor and had long polished metal shin pads that stretched from his ankles to his knees.

Bugs spotted Todd peeking around the corner. "Centurion, there is the man I speak of!" Bugs went over to Todd and pulled him out into the open. "This is the man who stole my wine jar!"

Todd yanked his arm free. "Let go of me you buck-toothed little twerp! I didn't *steal* anything from you."

The two Romans surrounded Todd. Bugs stepped closer and sniffed. "I believe my friend at the fire was right about you. Indeed, you certainly smell like dung."

“Rather, he has been lying in it,” the Roman said and pointed to Todd’s backside with his spear.

Todd smiled sarcastically. “Alright, that’s very funny, guys. Look, I don’t want any trouble. I’m just passing by.”

“Where is my wine jar?” Bugs shook an accusing finger at Todd. “I said you could drink the wine, but I never said you could keep the jar.”

“You said I could have it,” Todd said. “How was I to know you wanted the jar back?”

“That jar was imported from Greece,” Bugs said, lisping on the S sound. “It cost me two denarii. Naturally I wanted it back.”

The young Roman poked Todd in the side with his spear. “Tell us where you hid the wine jar!”

Todd jumped aside. “Hey! That’s sharp. Watch it with that thing!”

“If you do not tell me where you hid the jar,” the younger soldier said, “I shall run it through you.”

“Look, I don’t have your friggin wine jar. I traded it for these sandals.”

“You see,” Bugs said. “He knew well the value of that jar. And so he stole it, sneaking away in the dark of the night.”

“Look, I’ll pay you back,” Todd said. “As soon as I get back to the States, I’ll write you a check.”

“This man is a Roman citizen,” the older, scar-faced Roman said. “You will indeed repay him. And until you do, you will not return to these states of which you

speaking. Now, tell us who you belong to. Your owner must pay your debt before I release you.”

“Owner? Do I look like a slave to you?”

“From the blue of your eyes and the yellow of your hair, I would say you are Gallic. Any Gaul brought back into the empire was brought back as a slave. Now do not lie to me. Tell me where to find your owner.”

“You know, that’s pretty insulting. Where I come, you’d be called a racist for a comment like that.”

“Answer my questions,” Scarface said. “If you have been emancipated, then show me your freedman’s papers.”

Todd patted down his tunic. “You know what? Left them at home. I’d show you my driver’s license, but somebody stole my wallet. Can I report that to you? You find the guy who stole my wallet and I’ll gladly pay this guy for his stupid jar.”

“I told you to stop evading my questions. Do I look like a fool to you?”

Todd furrowed his brows, looking the guy over as if pondering his response.

“Enough!” Scarface motioned at the other soldier.

A blow struck Todd on his calves. His feet came out from under him, sending him hard to the ground. The young soldier brought the butt of his spear down on Todd’s chest, pinning him.

Scarface seized Todd’s squirming legs in an iron grip. The other soldier took one of Todd’s legs and they both dragged him over the ground toward the jail. “Who is the fool now?” Scarface yelled as he pulled.

Todd dug his fingers into the rough earth and kicked to get free. “No, wait! I’ll pay for the jar! Let me go!”

“It is too late for that,” Scarface said. They both heaved Todd over the threshold of the jail. They exited the cell, slammed the door, and locked it shut.

Todd quickly came to his feet and went to the window, clinging to the metal bars. “Wait! You can’t leave me here. I get a phone call! Where’s my phone call? Look . . . , I know a plastic surgeon back home. If you let me out of here, I’ll take care of that ugly scar.”

Scarface unsheathed his sword and sneered. Todd retreated to the far corner of the cell. “Actually, that scar looks good on you. Sort of a rugged look. Goes well with that skirt.”

Scarface grunted, sheathed his sword, and stepped out of site.

Back against the wall, Todd slid down to the floor of the cell and sat in awe. He was stunned at the brutality of these heathens. Never in his life had he been treated in such a way. The US embassy would hear about this.

Todd sniffed at the air. A rancid odor of urine, feces, and sweat permeated the air. The sound of labored, mucous rattled breathing came from the opposite corner of the cell. A filthy, naked, emaciated man lay on the floor curled up into a tight ball. He had a thick carpet of matted, black fur on his back, reminding Todd of a mangy dog. He was covered in cuts, bruises, and abrasions. He was so skinny that each knob of his spine was clearly visible, even under that thick hair. Fur-back never stirred, but just lay there, breathing noisily, seemingly unaware of Todd’s presence.

Todd scooted closer to the far corner of the cell to maintain a sterile distance from the clearly diseased man.

Suddenly, Fur-back uncurled himself and sat upright, his bloodshot eyes darting around the room. His body spasmodically twitched and a low, guttural voice emanated from his mouth. “Yoouuuuu!”

His twitching suddenly ceased and he sat motionless for a moment. Then, slowly, purposefully, the bones in his neck made a sickening crack as his head swiveled toward Todd. “Yooouuuu!”

Todd pressed himself tightly to the stone wall and stared into the man’s bloodshot, dilated eyes. They glowered with intense hatred. The man’s head twitched violently. Another voice rose from his throat. White foam gathered on cracked lips, bubbling and dripping down to his chin. “Yoouuuu!”

“Me?” Todd said in a whimper. “I didn’t do anything to you.”

Without warning, the naked beast pounced. He snatched Todd by the foot and hurled him to the center of the floor with astonishing force. Fur-back pounced again and gripped Todd by the throat in a fierce grip.

Todd gasped for air under the crushing pressure on his neck. He kicked and punched wildly, landing several hard blows to the man’s face and head. Blood oozed from the man’s nose and mixed with the foam on his mouth. Air hissed from his lips and churned the blood and foam into a pink froth.

Todd landed two more punches to the cheek. Unfazed, Fur-back only tightened his grip on Todd’s throat. Todd clutched Fur-back’s arm. He strained frantically to free himself, digging his nails into the assailant’s skin.

“Yooouuu!” Fur-back howled. “You do not belong here, Todd Heller! You belong to us! You cannot escape your destiny. You belong to us!”

Todd gasped for air. His eyes bulged as blood pressure built inside his head. He kicked, punched, and squirmed wildly, fighting to free himself from that unrelenting grip. He strained to scream through a crushed airway. He wrenched his head back and forth, grappling to sustain fleeting consciousness. His arms fell limp to the floor. All sound hushed. The cell faded to dark.

## Chapter 7

Todd heaved a deep breath. The lights came on. He coughed and gagged as he rolled away from Fur-back, his lungs feeding hungrily at the air. He became aware of another presence—Eleazar.

Fur-back cowered away, scooting his naked and bleeding body along the floor. “He is ours!” Fur-back screeched. “You have no right!”

Eleazar flashed Fur-back a sharp look and thrust an accusing finger. “Be silent, Samsapeel! The Lord will do as he pleases. Those of this age have witnessed his coming, yet they rejected truth nonetheless. Todd Heller will have the same privilege.”

“Noooooo! Let us have him. He is not a believer. He is ours!”

“In the next world, perhaps he will be yours. In this world, he must choose of his own free will. In the name of Jesus the Christ, Son of God almighty, I command you to leave that man!”

“Nooooooooo!” Fur-back howled maniacally. He suddenly collapsed to the floor and passed out cold.

Eleazar extended a hand to Todd. “Come, Todd. Quickly!”

Todd grabbed the hand, came up from the floor, and trailed Eleazar out of the cell and onto the street. He stood for a moment as his head cleared, gently fingering his burning neck. He glanced around, dumbfounded as to how Eleazar had managed to spring him from that jail. He spotted the two guards in the back of a wagon, soundly asleep. Scarface was even snoring.

Eleazar took Todd by the arm and urged him along. “This way!”

Todd eagerly followed. He called ahead to Eleazar. “How did you do that? You put something in their water.”

They rounded the corner of a building and Eleazar stopped. “It was the Lord that made them sleep.”

Todd hugged the building with his back, peaking around the corner to make sure they weren't being followed. Satisfied, he turned back to Eleazar. “The Lord, huh? Stick with that story. Where I come from, what you did is a felony.”

“Come, let us proceed to a safer place.” Eleazar said. “We need to talk privately.”

“You got that right,” Todd said.

Suddenly, bucktooth Bugs yanked on Todd's cloak. “You, there! Where do you think you are going?”

Eleazar stepped between Todd and Bucktooth. "I apologize for the actions of my servant. After all, he is a Gaul. Would you expect anything less?"

"I expect to be paid what is due."

Eleazar held out four tiny brass colored coins. "I think you will agree this is far more than the value of your wine jar. Take the excess for your troubles."

Delight flashed in Bucktooth's eyes. He snatched the coins from Eleazar's hand. "I suppose under the circumstances four denarii would be an appropriate exchange."

"Very well," Eleazar said. "Again, I apologize for any undue anguish caused by my servant."

Bucktooth greedily eyed the coins in his hand. "It was a pleasure doing business with you," he said and moved off down the street.

"Come," Eleazar said. "We should go before the soldiers awake."

Eleazar walked ahead of Todd. He glided along with hardly any bobbing of the head, more like he was moving on wheels rather than feet. They left town and followed a trail that wound alongside the lake. Eleazar finally stopped under the shade of a fig tree. Todd put the tree trunk between himself and Capernaum, just in case.

"We are safe here," Eleazar said. "We can talk freely now. I am certain you have many questions."

"You got that right," Todd said.

"Ask me anything you like," Eleazar said. "I am incapable of deceit."

Todd started to speak, but just stared instead. It was hard not to. If not for his chiseled male bone structure, this Eleazar guy would make a stunning woman. His complexion was flawless, not the slightest blemish or discoloration. He looked to be

about thirty, yet for some reason, maybe it was his mannerisms or the way he talked, he seemed much older.

“Speak to me, Todd. What do you want to know?”

“First, you can start by explaining . . ., look I’m sorry. I don’t mean to stare. But what do you use on your face? I bet you’ve never had a zit in your life.”

Eleazar smiled and sunlight glinted off his perfect, gleaming white teeth.

“That sounded gay, didn’t it?” Todd said. “Cause if it did, I’m not.”

Eleazar just stared.

Todd fumbled awkwardly for words. “Alright, uhh, questions. You could say I’ve got a few.” Todd thumbed back towards Capernaum. “First, you could explain what just happened back there. What’s the deal with that hairy maniac? I must have really pissed him off. He even knew my name!”

Eleazar gazed intently at Todd with deep emerald green eyes that seemed to almost fluoresce. “Demons, Todd. That pitiful man has many demons. They will not bother you as long as I am with you.”

“Demons? I’ve got my demons too, but I don’t go around strangling people.”

“Rest assured your demons are quite different from the demon that possessed that man.”

Todd held his hand up to silence Eleazar. “Alright, Joke’s over. What is this, a new reality show? You got a hidden camera under your robe? It’s like the Truman Show, only I’m Jim Carrey.”

“You have finger size bruises on your neck, Todd. Does it not throb with pain? You came very close to death. Is that something a television producer would sanction? This is all very real with very real consequences.”

Todd peered around the tree, gently caressing the tender skin on the neck. It was certainly real pain.

“Had you only stayed with me,” Eleazar said, “this would not have happened.”

“So what do you want me to say, thank you? I didn’t ask for this. If I was home right now this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Please be patient, Todd. Some day you may thank me. If you want to go home, listen to what I have to say without running away, without throwing dishes at me. That was rude, by the way.”

“Forgive my ill manners, but I’ve been under a little stress lately.”

“I can understand that. But if you will bear with me, I will explain everything.”

“So you admit it then. You *are* behind dragging me here.”

“Clearly I was a participant.”

“They call that kidnapping. It’s a federal offense.”

“All I ask is that you follow me over the next few days and then I will take you home.”

“A *few days*! I can’t stay here that long. I’ve got a work schedule. People will miss me. They’ll have posters up with my face on it.”

“I assure you that will not happen. Nobody in Livingston will know you left.”

“It’s been two days. The police are probably looking for me already.”

“To them you have never left. Sit down. Please,” Eleazar said, gesturing to a small boulder next to the tree. “I will explain everything.”

Todd moved to the rock and sat. “Alright, let’s hear it. This better be good.”

“Thank you,” Eleazar said. He paused as if measuring his words carefully. “Do you recall once telling Laura that you wished you had a time machine? That way you would take her back in time and show her the Lord she worshiped was nothing more than a wandering preacher with clever proverbs and sleight of hand. You said that after his death legends began to grow about him, eventually leading to a whole new religion.”

Todd sat dumbfounded. Indeed, he had that very conversation with Laura only weeks ago. “How could you possibly know that? Is Laura in on this too?”

“Be careful what you wish for, Todd. The genie is out of the bottle. I am that genie. Rather, I am an angel of God and I have brought you here in an attempt to save your eternal soul.”

A wide smirk spread across Todd’s face. “I knew it! This *is* a reality show. So where is the camera?” Todd smoothed his hair self-consciously. “I hope you’re getting my good side.”

“Todd, your eternal destination is no joking matter.”

“You really expect me to believe you’re an angel? So where’s your wings? Aren’t you guys supposed to have glowing halos around your heads? And where’s your harp?”

“That is only a fictional representation. As you can see, I have no wings like a bird. Rather, I am spirit.”

“Then how come I can see you?”

“Because I am now in the flesh, with no special abilities. My primary purpose is to be a messenger, a harbinger for the coming kingdom. It would be hard to speak to you without vocal chords.”

“So you just . . .” Todd snapped his fingers. “Poof, and you’re human?”

“It involves quantum mechanical, energy to mass, multidimensional processes you wouldn’t understand. However, we do it frequently. We do whatever is necessary to fulfill the will of God, and we do it gladly. You humans are unaware, but we angels find you quite entertaining. For us, the entire world is a stage.”

“I’m glad you find this so amusing. I’m sure the television audience is loving this too. I gotta tell you, I’m finding you pretty entertaining myself. You’re quite the storyteller. So let me recap. You’re an angel and you seem to be implying that you’ve brought me back in time, presumably during the time of Jesus.”

“Why yes, Todd. That is exactly what I am saying.”

“So I’m in ancient Israel now, surrounded by *Jews*?”

“You say that as if you have a problem with Jewish people?”

“I get it now. This is a reality show with Jewish producers. Is that what this show is about? You take a bigot and show him the light?”

“I told you this is not a reality show.”

“You’re lying. Or should I say acting? You know how I know you’re lying?”

Eleazar just stared.

“Because everybody I’ve come across speaks English. *English*, Eleazar, not Hebrew.”

“In truth, they are speaking Aramaic. You only understand it to be English. God has also given you knowledge of Greek and some Latin, languages you will need to know if you are going to learn here.”

“That’s absurd. Do you hear the words coming from your own mouth?”

“It is nothing compared to the Tower of Babel.”

“Oh, it’s babble all right. The babbling of a raving lunatic. Or a clever television host. So where is it?” Todd’s eyes darted around until they fell on the tree. “It’s in this tree, isn’t it? Is that why you had me stop here? Or maybe there’s a camera crew in that boat out there. Maybe that sail acts like an antenna. That’s very clever.”

“Please, Todd, be rational. If you will only consider the facts, you will know this is all real. Tell me, what is the last thing you remember before awaking by the lake?”

“I remember I was drunk. Actually, it was more of a hard buzz. I was walking to my car. Eddie stopped to harass me. When I crossed the street, Eddie must have hit me from behind.” Todd rubbed his temples, trying to remember. “Then Andrea must have drugged me. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Does it? Does that really make any sense?”

“It makes more sense than what you’re feeding me!”

Eleazar sat on the boulder next to Todd and placed a consoling hand on Todd’s shoulder. “I will tell you the truth now.”

Todd shrugged away. “Get your hands off me, Mr. ‘I clothed your naked body’. If you want to talk, talk. But no touching. I’m funny that way.”

“As I was saying, I am a ministering angel of God the Most High. My job is to help all of those who will inherit salvation. In fact, I was once the ministering angel of Jake Simon.”

Todd opened his mouth to object.

“Hear me out,” Eleazar said. “Please.”

Todd sighed. “You were saying?”

“When Jake died, I met his soul in the very room in which you worked to revive his body. Despite the years of psychological torment at your hands, he had compassion on you, his worst enemy. His very last request before leaving Earth was that I take you on as my charge—that I become your ministering angel.”

“So Jake prayed for you to take me to this hellhole? More like he got Eddy to do it. He must have arranged it before he died.” Todd rose from the boulder and stood, staring out onto the brown rolling hills that lay just beyond the lake. “So what are they calling this? The Todd Heller show?”

“Ninety-three times.”

“What’s that?”

“That is the number of times you have verbally admitted that you would not believe in God until you saw proof, until you saw the miracles for yourself. Up until your conversation with Laura in the parking lot, you had said that ninety-two times. You first said it at the age of twelve.”

“So now you’ve been following me around with pen and paper, jotting down every word I’ve said over the past twenty-eight years?”

“All men will give account for every careless word they utter. You yourself said in the parking lot of the ER. You said you were not gullible enough to believe without proof. That is why I have brought you here. So you can see the miracles for yourself. For you, it is the only way.”

“You were listening to our argument in the parking lot? Laura really is in on this whole thing! She probably made up the story about moving to New York. I can’t believe this!”

“And that is why you are here. Because you can’t believe.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe. Your story is ludicrous!”

“So what is your explanation? That this is just a reality show? Please, Todd, use some reason.”

“I can’t explain it!” He spun around to face Eleazar. “That’s why I’m trying to get the truth out of you! The *truth*, not this crazy crap you’re feeding me!”

“The truth is you were not hit on the head. You were not drugged by Andrea. Think, Todd, don’t you remember seeing it come at you just before losing consciousness? Remember the yellow color of the taxi—the one that hit you and killed you?”

“*Killed* me? Now you’re saying I’m dead?”

“There is no death for humans, only a change in form and location.”

“You know what I mean. I’m . . .” Todd hesitated to say it. “Maybe . . . that’s it! I’m in hell! I’ve died and gone to hell! No, that couldn’t be it because there is no hell. There’s no Heaven either.

“You are neither in heaven or hell. Rather, you are caught in between along with the rest of humanity. In Livingston, your body was revived and is now, or, rather, *will be*

in a coma. During the brief period of your body's death, we snatched your spirit away and placed it in this body. When the time is right, you will return to your body in Livingston. But we have much to do until then—much to do and much to learn.”

Todd gapped at Eleazar, nodding his head in disbelief. “You know, I must be going nuts, but you're already there. You're crazier than that *demon*-possessed maniac back there. Either that or you're a very good hired actor. Now I'm done with you. Just stay away from me!”

Todd stalked up the hill, headed for no telling where. He couldn't go back into that town, not with those guards looking for him. His best bet was to find another town—a town with a *phone*.

He looked back to see if Eleazar was following. Suddenly, his foot struck a fallen tree branch. He lost his footing and fell forward. He collapsed to the ground, the rocky soil grinding into his elbow. “Perfect! What next?”

He started to stand, but stopped frozen, eyes fixed in fear. Two unfeeling black eyes of a cobra snake bore into him. Its neck fanned out and its head arched back, poised to strike.

## Chapter 8

Todd lay helpless in the dirt, staring certain death in the face. Cobra venom was a powerful neurotoxin. Just one bite would leave him a heap of jelly with paralyzed muscles and lungs. His mind raced for a solution. Should he jerk away? The cobra was certainly faster. Move slowly? Any move would cause a strike.

*God, help me. What should I do?*

A stone whizzed past Todd's ear. It pelted the snake in the head, jerking it violently to the ground in a cloud of dust. Todd frantically scooted a safe distance away. His eyes were fixed on the dust cloud. Everything was still. He rose slowly to his feet. The snake was dead, its skull misshapen and bloody. Todd turned to face the source of the killer stone.

Eleazar stood there smirking with a flattened leather strap swinging side-to-side, dangling from his fingertips. “David used a sling just like this one to slay Goliath. Nine feet tall, he was.”

Relief washed over Todd. In that one moment he knew Eleazar was not the enemy, but a strange friend instead, deluded though he may be. “Eleazar, your timing is impeccable. The writers of this show have a tight script.”

“The Lord is my screenwriter. It was he who guided my hand. It was he who answered your prayer.”

“Come again?”

“Just now, you prayed a silent prayer. You asked God to help you.”

Todd searched his memories. Maybe he thought something like that, but who wouldn't? It was just instinct. “Whatever thoughts I had were only natural under the circumstances.”

“That is because your brain is wired for belief. Your own scientists will tell you that. Will you now follow me so that I can help you live a more natural life? Come with me to Bethsaida. It is not far. We will dine with Zebedee. His wife is a fine cook.”

Todd looked into the clearing dust at the lifeless, bloodied snake and considered his options. He could keep heading down that snake infested path to an uncertain destination, or he could give in and see what it was that this Eleazar character kept yammering about. “This Zebedee. You said his wife is a good cook?”

“The best in all of Bethsaida.”

Todd looked down and eyed his own dusty, donkey manure stained cloak. “So is the dress formal or casual?”

Todd followed Eleazar along the shore of the lake. They headed in the general direction of the snow-capped mountain in the distance.

“When we get to Bethsaida,” Eleazar said without turning around, “I must caution you to say as little as possible. Watch me carefully. Do as I do and speak only when spoken to. Remember, most of those that surround you are Jewish, and the Jews of this time have strict laws of behavior. The only reason they will tolerate your presence is because they will assume that you are my slave, captured from Gaul. I will tell them I am helping you convert to Judaism.”

“What is it with Gaul? Why does everyone keep calling me that?”

“The nation known as Germany has not yet been established. Your genetic origins are indeed from the peoples that inhabit the region known in this time as Gaul. To these people, you look like a Gaul.”

“Great. So I’m supposed to pretend I’m a Jewish convert from Gaul.”

“I could say Christian convert. However, Christianity has not yet been established. Therefore, you are converting to Judaism under the guidance of Rabbi Yeshua. Also known as Jesus.”

“So I have to pretend to be a Jew? I get it now. This particular reality show is a comedy. Very funny. Your ratings will be through the roof.”

Eleazar stopped his advance and turned to Todd. “If you insist on believing this is a television show, then consider this the role you have been hired to portray. Follow the script as we anticipate, and your paycheck will be more than you can possibly imagine.”

“Then it’s true. This is a reality show!”

“I did not say that. That is your theory.”

Todd scanned the rolling hills suspiciously. “Just make sure you get me one of those towels for my head.”

“Yes, we need to get you a head scarf. The sun can be quite brutal during the summer months.”

“Sunburn is not my concern.”

“So what is your concern?”

“When you hide the camera on a rooftop, I’d rather the world not get a bird’s eye view of my balding scalp.”

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Todd bent down and twisted the bottom hem of his robe to wring out excess water, still damp from wading across waist high waters of the Jordan. It was about an hour later, and he found himself sitting atop a stone slab with a hole that had been bored into the center. Above the hole, a teepee of three sturdy branches held a rope that lowered a bucket into a well beneath.

From there he could see Bethsaida in all its primitive glory. It was basically a fishing village spread out on the east bank of what Eleazar had mentioned was the Jordan River. From his hillside vantage point, Todd watched as two boats wound through a marsh waterway. They moved away from boat docks and into the expanse of what Todd now knew to be called the Galilee. The town spread up the hill away from the Galilee for about a mile, with patches of trees and crops planted between stone buildings.

Eleazar hoisted up a leather-lined bucket from the well. “Drink, Todd. You do not want to get dehydrated.”

“Are you sure it’s okay?” Todd said. He knew he needed fluids. Alcohol didn’t count as it just dehydrated the body even more. What he needed was water—clean water, free of parasitic infestation. The last thing he needed was amoebic dysentery. If he contracted an intestinal bug, he’d lose even more water and quite possibly die from electrolyte imbalance.

“Yes, it is safe to drink. There is no bacterial contamination in this well. I assume that is your concern.”

“What about . . .”

“And no parasites either.”

Todd stared warily at the seemingly pure water.

“Trust me,” Eleazar said. “The water is good. It is just like your bottled spring water at home.”

“What about the other mouths that have been on this bucket?”

“Why would I continue to save you only to poison you now?”

“Alright! Just give me a second.” Todd built his nerve and then put the bucket to his mouth and took a long gulp. It tasted okay. He drank some more.

Just then, the shadows of two men overtook him. Todd put the bucket aside and stood.

“Shalom, Eleazar!” the first man said in a gruff voice. It was a rugged brute with a tangled mess of a beard. His eyebrows were thick and bushy and his uncovered hair was a disheveled curly black. His wardrobe was little more than layered rags.

“Shalom, Simon!” Eleazar kissed Simon on the cheek and squeezed his forearms affectionately. He turned to a brazen looking young man with a striped tunic. His beard

was trimmed down to a point and he pierced Todd with fiery eyes. Eleazar hugged and kissed this guy too. “James, your father is well?”

“Zebedee is well,” Simon said. “I trust you will come to his home for dinner tonight. And bring your servant as well. He appears weak from his travels. A good meal will give him strength.”

James tensed and straightened his posture. “But, Simon. Is he not a *gentile*?”

“He is converting to Judaism as taught by Yeshua,” Eleazar said. “Please be patient with him, as he has much to learn.”

Todd returned James’ glare. “Hey, buddy, watch who you’re calling a *gentile*.”

Simon chuckled and slapped James on the shoulder. “Please pardon James. He means only to maintain the purity of his people. We will go now. Come, James, let us return home and slaughter the lamb for supper.”

Eleazar watched them leave, and then turned his attention back to Todd. “Do not take offense by what James said. A gentile simply means anyone who is not a Jew. I would think you would consider that a compliment.”

“You got that right,” Todd said. “And don’t tell these guys I’m a Jew convert. That isn’t going to happen. Not in this life and not in the next, assuming there is a next life.”

“If you want to eat I suggest you be silent and play along. Please, try to put aside your prejudices, for you know in your heart that they are born of ignorance and hate.”

“But they’re prejudice against me! For *not* being a Jew!”

“Do you see how it feels to be the object of racism?”

“Look, I am not a racist. Maybe I acted that way once, but I’ve changed.”

“Have you? Or have you only suppressed your feeling because you know they are not popular, not politically correct?”

“I’m not a bigot!”

“Then I suggest you behave that way.”

“Fine, I wouldn’t want to embarrass you in front of your friends. And speaking of friends, if you’re really an angel, then how come you seem to know these people so well? Haven’t you spent the last few thousand years playing harps in cumulous clouds?”

“I came and spent some time here, laying the groundwork for your arrival. When you live outside of time, you have that luxury. If we were both strangers, it would be very difficult getting close to the twelve.”

“In other words, you spent time with these guys off stage to rehearse your lines. I just hope the food isn’t plastic props.”

“On the contrary. I think you will find dinner quite savory.”

“So what are we waiting for? Lead the way.”

“Very well. But I must ask you to be polite and cordial to James as well as the other guests. Your hostility will get you nowhere in life.”

“Look, that guy started it. He called me a gentile.”

“But it is true.”

“Maybe, but I didn’t like the way he said it.”

“We angels have never understood the need for you humans to constantly bicker among each other. If you want to see why the world is so painful, you need only look in the mirror. If you obeyed the laws God gave you, there would be no hatred. You would

need no armies, no police, jails, lawyers, or judges. You could devote all those resources into building a better world.”

“If your God is so good, then why doesn’t he do something about it?”

“In other words, why does he not just kill people like you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“God has already tried that approach. But the sons of Noah only gave birth to more evil men. But there is another way. A better way.”

“Noah? Like in Noah’s ark?” Todd took in Eleazar wearily. “Look, I’m too hungry to argue.”

“Good. That was my intention.” Without another word, Eleazar turned and glided off toward Bethsaida.

## Chapter 9

Zebedee's house and several other homes were built on a peninsula of land surrounded by marsh. At the end of the peninsula, a boat dock of piled stone jutted out into the waterway that wound through the marsh and into the open waters. The home of Zebedee was made of granite with smaller stones and plaster to fill in the gaps. There was no glass in the windows, only wood lattice to keep out the thieves. And up against the outside wall of the house, a staircase led up to a flat roof with three small rooms on top.

“This is quite an elaborate prop,” Todd said, banging on the sidewalls of a wooden ox cart.

“Are you so arrogant?” Eleazar said. “Why would anybody want to build a television show around you?”

“What do you want from me? This is a little hard to swallow.”

“So you will agree that this is no reality show.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve got other theories.”

“Please, share them with me.”

“How about an alternate universe? Some scientists believe in parallel universes. I’ve been abducted by aliens and taken to an alternate universe.”

Eleazar just stared.

“Answer me!”

“Think whatever you like of this universe, but I assure you it is real and the consequences are permanent.”

Todd moved to the back of the ox cart and sat. He rubbed his bare knees anxiously. “There’s still one possibility we haven’t discussed.”

“And what is that?”

“That I’ve gone insane, just like my mother. I’m hallucinating everything. They say schizophrenics dream while they’re wide-awake. You could be the psychiatrist assigned to pull me back to reality. Maybe I’ll come to and suddenly find myself in a padded room wearing a straight jacket.”

Eleazar folded his arms over his chest and brought his index finger to his chin as he studied Todd’s latest theory. “I think your true diagnosis is denial. Everything that you love has been stripped away from you. The natural response is denial. Then you become angry.”

“Oh, I’m angry already.”

“Good, then you are getting closer to acceptance.”

Todd sat there on the ox cart in front of Zebedee's house speechless, worn down, unable to rationalize anymore. He seemed utterly incapable of winning an argument with this guy, Eleazar the angel. He was too physically and mentally drained to keep up a battle of wits. All he could do was play along.

“Didn't you say I was going to get dinner if I followed you here?”

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The cobbled floor of Zebedee's home was cold on bare feet. Salome, Zebedee's wife, had met them in the courtyard and traded Todd's manure stained robe for a clean one. Then, after the kid at the door washed both Todd and Eleazar's feet in a water basin, Todd followed Eleazar barefoot into the entryway of Zebedee's home.

A noisy clatter of voices echoed. Men sat around three raised platforms that served as a tabletop, situated in a U shape so the waiters could serve the food from the center of the tables. Around the tables, men lounged on low couches, some lying down against cushions, while others sat up.

A man called from the center table. “Eleazar, you have returned! Come, recline with us.” He was one of those guys that had a gray beard yet the hair on their head was still its natural color. He'd look a lot younger if he shaved.

“Thank you, Zebedee. Peace be with you. May my servant join us as well?”

“Yes, the servant you went to retrieve.” Zebedee motioned to an empty space on the couch. “Please, sit. Have some wine.”

Eleazar lowered himself to the couch like platform and lay back against some pillows, taking the stance of the other guests. Todd sat Indian style instead. All around the low table bearded men, maybe fifteen of them, lay down against pillows, looking toward Zebedee. Todd recognized the man to Zebedee's left. He was Simon, that burly fisherman dude he'd met earlier. Next to Simon was the guy Todd had exchanged words with, James.

Sitting upright to Zebedee's right was none other than the speaker, healer, comedian, magician that everyone seemed to refer to as Master. Only Master looked different now, illuminated by oil lamps instead of sunlight. He wore no headscarf and his dark, shoulder length hair was slicked down with oil and parted down the middle to form a crisp line on his scalp. He had a long nose and owlish, probing dark eyes. His neatly trimmed beard fell down a couple of inches from his chin with a wedge cut into the bottom hair. He looked quite regal, actually. Even the shape of his forehead and brows seemed to be ready made for a crown. Yet, there was something odd about this Master. He had a demeanor about him that made you stare, even though you weren't sure why you were staring.

If this wasn't a reality show, then could it really be? Was this Master the historical Jesus of Nazareth, sitting there in the flesh? Could this be the man who unwittingly inspired the world's largest religion? A wave of anxiety stirred in Todd and he shifted uncomfortably. It's not that he believed Jesus was the Son of God. It was because he might be in the presence of the most famous man in history.

No, he refused to play that game. That was *not* Jesus because time travel was not possible. He relaxed a tad, but kept a respectful posture nonetheless—just in case.

The Master gave Todd an amiable smile, popped a date into his mouth, and refocused on the conversation between Zebedee and Simon.

Even if this guy wasn't the Jesus of history, there was still something magnetic and fascinating about him. He just sat there, eating with his fingers just like everybody else, but Todd couldn't stop staring at him. As Todd glanced about the room, he noticed everyone else's eyes were drawn to the Master like football fans, eyes fixed on the kicker for the game winning field goal.

Master Yeshua looked Todd's way again, giving him an eerie feeling of being inside a CAT scan, as if this Yeshua wasn't just studying facial features, but the inside as well. Yet the Master's gaze seemed natural at the same time, like a gardener gazing upon his flowers in the spring.

Todd's cheeks heated up and he started to squirm again. He'd initially planned to corner the Master in dinner conversation, to interrogate him about the girl he supposedly raised from the dead. He knew he'd never muster the nerve to bring the subject up. It just seemed inappropriate, somewhat rude under the circumstances.

"Recline, with us, Todd," Eleazar said, breaking Todd from his thoughts. "It is the custom here."

"No thanks," Todd said. "I'm comfy like this."

A woman emerged from a doorway concealed by a curtain made of woven straw. She approached and handed Todd and Eleazar fluid filled cups. Todd took the cup and sniffed.

"You will enjoy that," Eleazar said. "It is wine diluted with honey."

Todd took a sip. It wasn't bad. He tipped the cup and downed the rest. A servant girl appeared instantly and poured some more of this honey wine into Todd's cup.

"Moderation," Eleazar said. "The fruits of Earth were intended to be consumed in moderation."

Todd rolled his eyes and took another long swig of honey wine. Simon rambled on about fishing, something about empty nets and gentile competition. Moments later, a young girl sat a tray with cheese, figs, raisins, and dates on the floor between Todd and Eleazar.

"Food at last," Todd said. He snatched a handful of figs and chewed ravenously.

"Thank you," Eleazar said to the servant.

"So am I going to have to wash dishes for this," Todd said, slurring his speech over fig pulp.

"They believe that God is prone to send his angels in disguise," Eleazar said. "It is God's way to test whether they are obeying the laws of hospitality. So often they are friendly not out of love, but because they believe they may be entertaining angels unaware. Unaware, indeed. Not only do they entertain me, but the Son of the Most High."

"Unaware indeed," Todd said in a mocking tone.

For the next few minutes, Todd ate quietly, chowing down on the local cuisine as some of the men recited poetry and discussed the affairs to the day. He ate barley stew using a round, flat piece of bread to fashion a sort of spoon. He ate another bowl of lamb stew with another piece of bread. For desert, he had raisin cakes, almonds, and pistachio nuts. He sat unnoticed during the meal, but as the group finished off the last of desert, Todd caught the attention of one of the men.

“Tell me, Eleazar, where did you get your servant?” the fancy-robed man lying next to Eleazar asked. His beard was neatly trimmed and he wore a round beanie cap on his head instead of a turban. “I hope you did not pay much for him. He looks to be well into his thirties. His days of hard labor are nearly passed.”

“From the looks of his hands,” James said from across the table, “he has not seen much labor in his days. And by the condition of his skin, he surely has not spent many days in the sun. Was he royalty?”

Eleazar laughed and looked at the guy with the beanie cap. “In truth, Levi, he—”

“I’m not a *servant*,” Todd said. “And I’m not a *Gaul*, either. I’m an American, held here against my will.”

“I am sorry if I offended you,” Levi said. “Because your face is shaven, I assumed you were a slave.”

“We are all servants, servants of the Most High,” the Master said. He gazed at Todd with lucid eyes making Todd blush again. Todd looked to Eleazar to rescue him.

“He is a servant and friend,” Eleazar said. “He is a new convert and I have been called to instruct him.”

“Ahh, a proselyte,” Levi said. “Welcome, then. So tell us, what do they call you in this *America*? It is a province of Rome, I assume.”

Todd glanced back at the Master. Fortunately, he’d resumed his conversation with Zebedee. “It’s in North America. You know, Hollywood? I’m sure you’ve seen movies from America.”

Eleazar spoke into Todd’s ear. “If you want to keep eating, I suggest you play along.”

“Yes,” Todd said. “It’s a northern province of Rome, on the edge of the empire. The city I’m from is called Livingston.”

“Ah, yes, Rome has more conquests with each passing year.”

“Not for long,” said a hawk-nosed man across the table. He had a swirled, bun shaped turban and shark-like eyes. “Not for long,” he said again with cool satisfaction and narrowed his eyes at the Master.

Levi rolled his eyes as if to say not again. He turned back to Todd. “So tell me, what of these *movies*? Men from distant reaches of the empire have passed through my booth. They brag endlessly about the advanced culture from which they come. Yet, I have never heard one speak of these movies.”

“They are like plays,” Todd said in his most serious, playing along voice. “They are performances that play out a story.” He was going to elaborate, but upon noticing the scolding look from Eleazar, thought better of it.

“Yes, yes, I have seen one of these movies while in Caesarea. Very interesting. You will have to show me one of these Hollywood plays, yes?”

“If only I could,” Todd said.

“So what is it that you are called in this America?” Levi asked.

“Todd Heller. *Doctor* Todd Heller, to be precise.”

“Todd. Is that a common name where you come from? What does it mean?”

“Uhh . . . I don’t know. It means Todd.”

“I see. Well, since you are a convert, perhaps we will give you a new name. It should be a name that describes you in some way. For instance, I am also called

Matthew. What do you think, Eleazar? What will be a good Hebrew name for this Todd of Livingston?"

"Todd will be fine," Todd said. "Thanks for offering."

"Very well," Levi said. "Todd it is. And what of this *doctor*? I am not familiar with this term."

"I'm a physician. I treat sick people."

"Ahh, a physician. I fear you will not find much work following Yeshua. Sick people do not stay sick for long when he is around."

"Fine with me. I don't plan on staying long enough to open a practice."

Zebedee cleared his throat and scratched at his stringy beard. "Eleazar, how long do you and your servant plan to stay in Bethsaida? Since my sons, John and James, have joined the Master in his ministry, I have been looking for two good men. I have a vacant servant's room. Stay there tonight and I will have work for you in the morning. At least do me the favor until you find more suitable work."

"Thank you, Zebedee," Eleazar said. "That is very gracious of you. We would be grateful for the room and the work."

"And I would be grateful for your labor. After dinner, I will show you to your room. Can you start work tomorrow?"

"We can start at daybreak."

## Chapter 10

On a woven mat, Todd lay on the floor of a small cubicle built on the roof of Zebedee's house, still pleasantly buzzed from all that honey wine the waitress kept bringing every time he held up his cup. He squirmed in his scratchy wool tunic, trying to get comfy enough to sleep. Hopefully sheer exhaustion would ease him to slumber, despite the unease he felt sleeping next to this weirdo who claimed to be an angel.

Eleazar stepped over to an olive oil lamp fixed to the wall and blew out the flame. "Get some rest, Todd. You have a long day tomorrow."

"So I hear," Todd said. "I can't believe you agreed to give half our pay for this tiny box and two meals a day. Couldn't you negotiate terms of our service?"

“Be grateful you are no longer sleeping with that goat. Besides, these mats are a luxury. They are far more plush than most,” Eleazar said and grinned mischievously.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Your mat is stuffed with goat hair.”

“Perfect,” Todd said. “Bethsaida’s version of Sealy Posturepedic, I take it. And this sorry excuse for a pillow is stuffed with goat hair too, I imagine.”

“At least you have a pillow. That is also a luxury. I tried to make you as comfortable as possible, considering the lifestyle you are used to.”

“Well I’m used to three pillows. I put one between my knees, one behind my head, and one to hug on with my arm.”

“Like a Teddy-Bear.”

“No, I just have to do something with my arm, that’s all. I sleep on my side, one arm goes under my head, and the other arm hugs the pillow. It’s the only way I can sleep.”

“Then you must learn to sleep another way, my pampered friend. There will be days ahead when you will not have that pillow, so sleep well now. It only gets tougher from here.”

“You’re a big comfort, Eleazar.”

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*Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Todd’s eyes flew open. He would know that noise anywhere. *Buzz, buzz, buzz.* There it was again. Todd sat up and strained to see in the darkened room. Eleazar was

sound asleep, but under the head covering that lay next to Eleazar, something had indeed been awoken.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Todd lifted Eleazar's head cover, careful not to awaken the slumbering angel. And then he saw it—the blue illuminated light with the time glowing in the dark.

“I knew it!” Todd snatched the cell phone and bolted out into the night. He ran down the stairs with his bare feet slapping against wooden planks. He hobbled down the street, rounded a corner, and hid from sight behind a neighbor's house.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.* Todd's eyes came alive as he inspected the cell phone by the light of the moon. “I knew this was all a set up.”

Yes, the gig was up. Instead of silencing the alarm, Eleazar had mistakenly put his phone on vibrate. *Buzz, buzz, buzz.* Somebody was certainly determined to talk to Eleazar. Todd flipped open the phone to see the caller ID. It read Edward Simon!

Todd angrily pressed the answer button. “Guess what I found, Eddie. How long did you think you could get away with this? Games over. I'm going to use this phone to call the police.”

“You are dreaming,” said the voice on the phone.

“Am I now? We'll see who's dreaming when they haul you away in handcuffs.”

“Todd, you are dreaming. Wake up.”

Hold on. That wasn't Eddie's voice. It was Eleazar. But he was sleeping like a baby. How could he be calling himself?

Todd felt a yank on his arm. He backed back out into the street, straining into the shadow cast by the house. “Who's there?”

Again, he felt a tug on his arm. “Todd, wake up.”

Moonlight faded to black. The next thing Todd felt was the rough fabric of a goat hair stuffed pillow pressing against his cheek.

“Wake up. You are having a bad dream,” Eleazar said.

Todd snatched the pillow from under his face and pelted Eleazar in the head. “It wasn’t a nightmare! It was a very good dream.”

“Sorry, Todd. I was only trying to help,” Eleazar said and handed Todd back his pillow.

Todd grabbed his pillow back and put his back to Eleazar. “If you don’t mind I need to get back to sleep. I’ve got a long day ahead, remember?”

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Todd bolted upright from his mat. His eyes darted around the room. “What was that? What’s going on?”

A cock bellowed loudly from the street.

Todd relaxed and fell back against his mat. “You’ve got to be kidding me. A rooster? What time is it anyway?”

Eleazar opened the window shutter and let the pale light of early morning into the room. “It is time to go to work.”

“Great,” Todd said and rubbed his aching back. “I’m still here. I was hoping I’d wake up from this nightmare.”

Eleazar stepped outside for a moment and came back into the room holding a clay basin filled with water. “Good, it rained last night. We have fresh water collected from

the roof runoff.” He set the basin down and looked to Todd. “Would you like a drink before I bathe in it?”

“You want me to drink runoff from the roof? Are you out of your mind?”

“Suit yourself.” Eleazar splashed his face with the water and rubbed it in. He reached down beside his mat, picked up his folded head covering, shook it open, and dried his face with it. He then put the covering on his head with it hanging down his back and tied a band around it to hold it in place. “It looks to be a sunny day ahead of us. We will ask Zebedee for your own headscarf. You will require one if you are to avoid sunburn. There is no shade once we are on the lake.”

“So is that how you keep your flawless complexion? By washing in roof water? How old are you anyway?”

Eleazar cocked his head and pondered the question. “I honestly do not know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? How do you not know your age?”

“I simply cannot calculate my age in human years. I am certain that I was created. However, I do not remember a time in which I did not exist. Where I come from, we are not *was* or *will be*, we simply *are*. Does that make any sense to you?”

“None of this makes any sense to me. Look, just forget I asked. I knew I wouldn’t get a straight answer out of you anyway. Back to my hygiene. I’ll take that headscarf. My hair’s so greasy I wouldn’t want to look like a slob in front of your fishing buddies. And how about a shave,” Todd said and rubbed his whiskers. “I haven’t shaved since I’ve been here. Before long I’ll be looking like you and every other bearded bum out there.”

“Razors are a luxury usually enjoyed by the Romans. I suggest you let your beard grow. We will have it trimmed when it gets too long.”

“I figured you’d say something like that.” Todd stood slowly and stretched. “So how about a shower? Is that bowl of face oil contaminated roof water all I get? I got dandruff, in case you haven’t noticed. Any chance of finding some Head and Shoulders in one of your markets?”

“That is why I’m going to get you a headscarf,” Eleazar said with a grin. “Your dandruff is grossing me out.”

“Grossing me out? Oh, that’s real funny. What kind of angel are you?”

Eleazar smiled and handed Todd the water basin. “You will have other opportunities for ritual cleansing as the day progresses. For ancient standards, the Jews are very clean. You could actually say they are religious about cleanliness.”

“Then it’s a smart religion. Still, I want no part of it.” Todd handed the basin back, sloshing water onto the floor. “What I do want is some Speed Stick. Not that anybody here would smell me over their own body odor.”

“Your nose will soon adjust to the smell.”

“It’s called olfactory desensitization. I’m perfectly aware of that.”

“God’s wisdom of design is truly amazing, is it not? Your brain learns to tune out certain odors so it can concentrate on more important, possibly life threatening odors.”

“Yeah, that’s amazing,” Todd said and sniffed at his armpits. “And merciful.”

“If you would only open your eyes you would see God’s miracles and mercy everywhere you turn.”

“How about the miracle of running water? Any chance I can find a toilet? Going in the bushes is getting a little old.”

Eleazar pointed to a clay pot with a lid on the top. “Use the chamber pot.”

“I figured as much,” Todd said. “So how do you flush this thing?”

“You take it to a field outside of town and dump it there.”

“Naturally. And toilet paper?”

“Use your imagination. Feel free to use the water in the basin,” Eleazar said and opened the door. “I’ll be outside when you are finished.”

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Todd and Eleazar worked their way to the boat dock. They carried leather pouches filled with barley loaves, figs, goat cheese, and Salome’s specialty, raisin cakes with honey. Eleazar also carried a flask of non-pasteurized goat’s milk cream to wash it all down. There was no sit down breakfast with coffee. It was work some, eat, then work the rest of the day. The second and final meal would be dinner.

“Walk faster,” Eleazar said. “We need to be on the dock by the time the sun tops the hills to the east. The boat will launch then.”

“You really expect me to go fishing with your buddies?”

“I gave the last of my denarii to your friend with the large front teeth. If you want to eat tomorrow we need to be on that boat.”

“So why do I have to fish? I hate fishing.”

“Zebedee needed the labor and you need to work. Maybe you would prefer being a soldier. Do you like having arrows shot at you? Or perhaps you would prefer to be a bandit, robbing people on the rural paths?”

“I want to go home! I want a pizza, a cheeseburger with greasy fries, and a diet Coke!”

“If you do not stop whining, I will leave you to fend for yourself. You will be begging for food scraps within a week. You can join the women without the protection of a father, husband, or brother. They must either beg or whore to survive. Perhaps you would prefer prostitution?”

“All right, Eleazar, take it easy. Put yourself in my shoes.”

“I *have* put myself in your shoes,” Eleazar said and pointed at his sandals. “I have left paradise in order to be here with you.”

“Well nobody asked you to.”

“Yes, somebody did. We have been over this before. Jake, out of his love for you, asked me to do anything I can to help you. *Anything.*”

Just then, Todd stepped into a puddle, sending muddy water over his bare feet and sandals. “Thanks a lot, Jake. I love you too.”

## Chapter 11

Todd bobbed with the waves at the mouth of the Jordan River where the water teemed with sardines. He peered through the drizzle at the snow-capped mountain in the distance. His new headscarf, as well as the rest of his clothes, were soaking wet from a sudden storm that was now winding down. He sat shivering in a wooden boat with tattered white and brown sails flapping in gusts of cold wind.

The boat was maybe eight by thirty feet and made of thick timbers and planks. Two oars on each side powered the boat when there was no wind. Two wooden boxes sat on the rough floor for sorting fish. Two groups of four men worked two fishing nets. Some old guy with leathery, sun baked sagging skin seemed to be in charge. He barked orders while everybody else worked.

Todd kicked at the pool of water in the bottom of the boat. “Eleazar, you told me to put this thing on my head so I wouldn’t get sunburned. I don’t see any sun.”

“It is coming.” Eleazar pointed at a patch of blue sky. “These storms develop often on the Galilee, especially this time of year.”

“We try again here,” barked the old man in charge. Mucous from his running nose clung to his mustache. He wiped his nose with his bare forearm and pointed to the lake. “To this side now.”

Eleazar gripped a knotted, patched up cast net made of hemp meshing. It had stone weights tied to its edges and a cord in the center to draw it in. “Take the net, Todd. The other men are grumbling about you. If you want to be paid you have to pull your own weight.”

“Yes, master,” Todd said and bent over. He wove his fingers into the rough net and lifted. His hands were already red and chaffed. Much more of this and they would start to bleed. There was only one solution—pretend to pull.

The men hefted the net, with it sagging noticeably on Todd’s end.

“On the count of three,” the old man said. They rocked the net back and forth, building momentum as he counted. “One, two, *three!*” On three, they flung the net overboard and waited as it sank. Another man adjusted the sail to get the boat moving so they could drag the net and snag some fish.

Todd leaned over to Eleazar. “That old man’s got a nasty cold. He should be in bed, taking Sudafed and Benadryl. He’s grossing me out.”

“That old man is only forty-three years old. Just three years older than you.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“It is a hard life here in ancient Palestine.”

“Tell me about it. And no wonder he’s sick.” Todd shivered and hugged himself in a futile attempt to stay warm. “They ever heard of rain coats?”

“Actually, you are handling the situation just as an ancient Jew would.”

“How’s that?”

“You get wet and complain about it. And then you stay wet until the sun dries you again.”

“If Rabbi Yeshua were with us,” the old man said, “he would have stopped this storm before we got wet, just as he did the other evening.”

The men clamored with one another and discussed the well-known account of what had happened.

“Todd,” Eleazar said, “did you happen to see a storm suddenly, unnaturally come to a halt the other day?”

“Maybe, but I’m sure there was a natural explanation.”

“Do you think so?”

“A storm is natural, isn’t it? Then there had to be a natural cause.”

“In all your years on Earth, have you ever seen nature behave that way?”

“No. But then again, I don’t get outside much.”

Eleazar stared.

“What?” Todd said. “I’m not a meteorologist. How do I know what’s natural or unnatural.”

Suddenly, the net tugged hard. Excited men clamored and tugged on the net.

“Pardon me, but he who hath not worked does not eat,” Todd said. He bent over the boat rail and gingerly put modest effort into hauling in the net. He and the other men hefted the catch into the boat and dumped the contents. Slimy, glistening fish flopped and twitched on the floor of the boat. Flaps of flesh quickly opened and closed, exposing the red ridges of gills, hopelessly heaving at nitrogen-saturated air that did little to oxygenate their blood.

“A good catch,” the old foreman with the runny nose said. “But it hardly compares to the catch Simon made with the help of Rabbi Yeshua two years ago. Simon had been fishing all night without a single fish entering his net. Yeshua told him to cast the net again. This time there were so many fish, the net tore from the weight.”

“So what do you think?” another man asked. “Is Yeshua the Messiah? Is he the one to free us from the tyranny of Rome?”

“I do not know,” the foreman said. “He is a great prophet, of this there can be no doubt. Who else could perform such miracles? However, he has never suggested that we take up arms against Rome. To the contrary.”

“But if not Yeshua, then who?” another man said. “I was certain John the Baptist was the Messiah, but now Herod has him jailed. Who now will free us from the stranglehold Rome has on us. Their taxes drain the lifeblood from Israel, taxes that only get worse every year. Soon they will tax the very air we breathe!”

“Yeshua must be the Messiah,” another said. “John himself said that Yeshua was greater than he. I heard John say that he was not worthy to untie the thong of Yeshua’s sandal. If not Yeshua, then who?”

As the men argued the identity of Yeshua, Todd wisely kept his opinion to himself, fearing one of those religious fanatics would toss him overboard. Still, he couldn't help wonder the same thing. Who was this Yeshua, the one called Master? Was he really just an actor in a reality show? If not, then what was the story behind that guy?

At the end of the day, Todd found himself standing next to the stone boat dock. Zebedee sat on the pier a few yards away, stringing a torn fishing net together with twine. Eleazar offered a hand and helped Zebedee stand. They spoke for a few seconds and Zebedee handed Eleazar something, patted him on the shoulder, and moved on to the other men, handing them something as well.

Eleazar walked over to Todd. "Here is your day's wages." He held out a small coin the size and color of a dime.

"Is that it?" Todd said in disgust. "One lousy coin? Great, now I can buy a stick of gum."

"That is a denarius," Eleazar said. "It is a Roman coin." Eleazar held the coin flat in his hand. "You see, it has the head of Caesar stamped on its face. It is the standard day's wage here in Galilee. It is a modest living, but a living none-the-less."

Todd snatched the coin from Eleazar's hand and stalked away toward the village, grumbling to himself. "I bust my butt for a lousy Caesar-headed dime."

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That evening after dinner, Todd escaped the lively Roman hating conversation and retreated to the staircase that ran up the side of Zebedee's house. Hopefully Eleazar

hadn't noticed him leave. No such luck. There he came gliding up those stairs like it was an escalator.

Eleazar moved to Todd's step and sat beside him. "The conversation was becoming heated, was it not? It made me uncomfortable as well. Had Jesus not returned to Capernaum they would have toned down their hatred. They always behave when he is present."

"Yes, I imagine you're right. They certainly don't want to offend their *loving* God by spouting off in front of his Son. So tell me, Mr. I've got all the answers. Why did your loving God make the world such a nasty place?"

"Actually, most of us angels think the Earth is quite beautiful. Did you notice the sunset tonight, the way the rays of light streaked orange through the clouds? Magnificent."

"You know what I mean, Eleazar. Don't skirt the issue. Yes, there's a lot of beauty on this planet, but it can be extremely hostile at the same time. Could we not do without the hostility?"

"I wondered when you would offer that argument. To humans that is a great conundrum. Tell me, Todd. Have you ever read the Bible?"

"What do you think? Of course not."

And then Eleazar's mood became somber, as if reliving bad memories. "Yes, this world can be a dreadful place. Atheists use that argument for their disbelief. But in doing so they only display their ignorance about what God has revealed to mankind. To find the answer to your question, you need only look to the opening chapters of the Bible. You must understand that Heaven is a place that fits the description of what man feels like the

world should be if it were indeed created by a loving God. At one time, all sentient beings lived in paradise. But there was a terrible rebellion in Heaven. And as we see in Genesis, man has chosen to follow the serpent and join that rebellion, and thus suffers the consequences of their self-imposed separation from God.”

“Alright, alright, whatever. Your explanation only makes sense if you believe in God. But since you mentioned Genesis, let’s go with that. How can all this around you be made in six days?” Todd waved his hands dramatically for effect.

“Tell me, Todd. You consider yourself a scientist. What is your scientific story of creation?”

“I don’t know. There’s hundreds of books on the subject. They’re still trying to figure it out.”

“When your scientists finally figure out how they *think* creation might have happened, you condense it down to a short version that these simple fishermen around you can understand and memorize. This story must also explain the reason their life is so harsh. Textbooks are useless to the simple peasant. And remember, such peasants represent the vast majority of those who have ever lived. Even in your own time, most of the world’s people do not have access to your level of education.”

“Alright, point taken, but back up a second. When scientists *finally* figure it out?” Todd said. “Who says they haven’t? Ever heard of evolution?”

“Did you know that scientists have recently discovered that the Earth is too young for life to have evolved from nothing?”

“I read somewhere that life evolved on Mars. Then it came to Earth in the form of bacteria.”

“Todd, Mars cannot even sustain already created life forms. Yet you argue that under such conditions life *evolved*?”

“They think Mars might have been different billions of years ago. But an asteroid hit it. That’s how life came to Earth, from space debris.”

“You would wager your eternal soul on such an absurd supposition?”

“Can we just change the subject?”

“Todd, even if evolution were true, would it not be a miracle that life forms had the inherent wisdom to somehow adapt to changing environmental conditions? Evolution only argues the foresight of the Creator.”

“You just got an argument for everything, don’t you?”

“It is what I do. The father of lies does his best to deceive you. My job is to clarify reality.”

“Just drop it, okay? Forget how we got here for a minute, would you? You’re missing my point.”

“So what is your point?”

“My point is that if God is so loving, then why does he allow so much pain?”

“Todd, you know as well as I do that a great majority of pain comes from man’s inhumanity to man, from man’s refusal to follow God’s moral code. Yet if God showed himself to man in all his power and glory, most men would surely obey the moral code. However, as a consequence it would hinder man’s free will. He would obey out of fear, not out of love. As an American, you can appreciate the desire for freedom. And so does God. He wants men to be free. Otherwise they become no more than unfeeling robots.”

“So even innocent children pay the price for man’s free will?” Todd scooted away from Eleazar, his breaths quickening, his hands starting to shake. “How can a loving God let innocent kids suffer?”

“That sounds like a personal grievance.”

“Yes, it’s *very* personal! Your God stood by and let my mother kill my baby brother. And then she tried to kill me! What kind of loving God does that to a ten-year-old kid? Why didn’t he intervene?”

“But how do you know that he did not intervene?”

“What are you saying?”

“Todd, your mother had severe post partum depression. When she found out that her baby had a terminal congenital heart defect, it drove her to literal madness. It drove her to drown her own child and then turn on you. But regardless of her actions, she does love you. In her own warped view of reality, she saw the world as such a dreadful place that she couldn’t bear to live in it any longer, nor could she bear to see you or your baby brother suffer. She wanted to spare you the pain of this world. You really should speak with her. Rescind the restraining order and have dinner with the poor woman.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! And what’s this about a heart defect? Nobody ever told me about any heart defect.”

Eleazar shrugged. “I told you already. I am an angel. It is in my job description to know the truth.”

“Well, I’m not buying it. No loving God would allow that. Not by my definition of love.”

“Indeed, where was this loving God in your household?”

“That’s what I asked you!”

“And now I ask you. Did your parents own a single Bible? Did your parents even once take you to church? Did they ever discuss God? Your father was on a committee dedicated to removing prayer from school. People like you and your father tell God to get out of their lives. You have asserted your free will. How can you expect God to bless and protect you while you demand that he leave you alone?”

“So how is that my fault? I was just a kid.”

“You are a grown man now. You must now make grownup decisions. When you forcefully push God out of your life, you create a vacuum. And in a vacuum, something will fill that space. Evil will gladly fill that space.”

“Oh, there was a vacuum, alright.”

“Not a complete vacuum. Again, you overlook the obvious.”

“And what is that?”

“That you are alive today. Your mother started to strangle you, but she let go. Why did she do that? Why did she just suddenly let you go?” Eleazar stood and went to the door of their cubical. “I will let you ponder the possibilities.”

## Chapter 12

Todd gazed out to the approaching green hills as the boat slowly drifted into a cove on its approach to Capernaum. He looked to his hands and examined his raw, scabbed fingers, probing for signs of infection. Three days of tugging on that rough fishing net had taken a terrible toll, despite the rags he had wrapped around his hands for protection. Now thick razor stubble covered his face, and he could feel his teeth rotting in his mouth from lack of brushing. He'd give anything—yes, even those three Caesar-headed dimes he'd earned—for a hot shower with soap and shampoo.

The boat bounced off the boat dock. Todd lurched forward and caught himself on Eleazar. The men clamored out of the boat and Todd followed them down the dock to the shore.

Eleazar studied the clouds. “Tell me, Todd, if a man labored on a house, pouring all of his love and creativity into that structure, would he not desire to live in that house, at least for a short time?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“So after creating the Earth in all of its splendor, God stepped into his creation in the form of a man, the prize of his creation. He spent thirty-three years suffering the toil of the flesh, for it was necessary if man was to be judged fairly. And he spent three years preaching to the inhabitants of this house, instructing them as to how they should live and what must be done to enter the Heavenly mansions.”

“I’m sure you have a point to this,” Todd said.

“Let us go see him in the flesh, inside his house. The synagogue is this way. You can see it from here,” Eleazar said and pointed to the tallest building in Capernaum.

“Come, we do not want to be late.”

“Ah, yes,” Todd said. “On the Sabbath we go to church. Don’t forget, you promised me a third meal today.”

Todd followed several paces behind Eleazar, the same way that wives always followed their husbands in this backwards place, where women were more or less property, often no better than a mule. And Laura thought she had it bad.

Eleazar stopped to take in the synagogue. Roman style pillars stood under an arch cut into the wall over the front door. An image of a seven-branched candlestick was carved into the stone above the door.

“I beg you, Todd. Do as I do or you may find yourself back in prison with another demon by the end of the day. “

“Relax, Eleazar, I’m not going to embarrass you. But you bring up a good point. What if those guards recognize me? I did escape from their jail.”

“That man who tried to kill you has succeeded in killing several others. Those soldiers were transporting their prisoner to Tiberius for trial. They are long gone by now. And if they should pass through again and say anything, we will just handle the matter according to local custom—we will bribe them.”

“I feel more at ease already.”

“Do not worry. Remember, you have an angel watching over you. Come, let us forget about the Romans and go into the synagogue.”

Todd and Eleazar followed a group of men all decked out in their Sabbath best as they worked their way into the building. Inside, women streamed in from a side entrance and went up stairs, segregated to a balcony. Up front, there was a raised wooden stage with a wooden lectern in the middle. Some seats were behind the lectern. Behind the seats was a curtained alcove, hiding something behind it.

“Behind that curtain is an imitation of the ark of the covenant,” Eleazar said. “The scrolls which are read here are kept inside this box.”

“So why the secrecy? What’s up with the curtain?”

“It is designed to mimic the great temple in Jerusalem. The ark is very holy and can only be viewed by a select few.”

“Uh, huh. Interesting,” Todd said, craning his head for familiar faces. “Ah, now there’s someone I know.” He gestured toward the front. A crowd clamored around Master Yeshua. “So where’s his entourage?”

“They have been sent out to preach. They will return in a few days.”

A group of men stood frowning at Yeshua. They wore black robes with fancy designs along blue fringes. A white cloth wrapped their foreheads, but over the cloth and flowing down their backs was a deep black hood.

“So what’s up with that pack of Grim Reapers? How come they get to sit up front?”

Eleazar chuckled to himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“The Grim Reaper is often a term used in reference to angels that share my profession. However, I assure you there is nothing grim about my appearance in the spirit.”

“Aren’t you full of yourself,” Todd said.

“There is no pride in my statement, for I did not make myself. Rather, my appearance is a reflection of my Creator.”

“Whatever, Eleazar. Enough about you. What’s the deal with those guys up front?”

“Those men are called Pharisees. They belong to a Jewish sect that obsesses over strict interpretation and observance of Mosaic Law. Yet they are self-righteous and sanctimonious hypocrites. They follow the letter of the law, but have no compassion. They have corrupted and complicated the law beyond reason. Had they seen us coming out of our boat, we would have been chastised for exceeding a Sabbath day’s journey of 2000 paces. That our journey was so we could worship God is irrelevant.”

“What prudes,” Todd said.

“It is worse than you realize. The Sabbath was intended for rest and for doing good, yet the strictest of Pharisees condemn men for helping each other even in emergencies. Lifting a finger to help your neighbor might be considered work. Unfortunately, they have great political power among the Jews. It is the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin that will call for the crucifixion of Jesus.”

“Nice. They’d be great fun at parties. So what’s up with the white robbed dudes over there?”

“Those are the Essenes. They live as separatists over by the Dead Sea. They have come to Capernaum to investigate the miracles of Yeshua. There is also a sect known as the Sadducees. They differ from the Pharisees in that they do not believe in the resurrection of the soul after death. In fact, they do not even believe in angels.”

“Now there’s something we have in common,” Todd said.

“That is why I have brought you here today. I want you to see something that may change your mind.”

“Don’t count on it,” Todd said and took his seat.

After a few minutes, some old man took the stage. A long striped towel draped over his head and fell to his knees, where tassels hung from its fringes. His gray beard fell down along the inner edges of this towel.

“That is the Rabbi,” Eleazar whispered. “He is like a Christian preacher, but Jewish.”

“Thank you, Eleazar. I know what a Rabbi is. Did I mention I went to college? In fact, I’m a real doctor.”

Eleazar shook his head and grinned.

The Rabbi opened with a prayer and then everybody recited what Eleazar called the Shema. Everyone spoke the opening lines in unison. “Hear oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”

Then the benedictions came, then the singing, and then the reading of the scrolls. It went on and on and on until finally the old Rabbi wrapped things up and everybody lumbered out of the synagogue with long faces. Todd followed Eleazar out a side door that led to a courtyard. Fifty or so people formed a semicircle around Yeshua, along with two Pharisees standing off to the side, casting stern looks.

“Rabbi!” a man called from the crowd. “My daughter has been deaf since birth. Have mercy and show us favor.”

“Bring her to me,” Yeshua said, motioning with his fingers.

The girl, maybe 8-years-old, sheepishly ambled forward and stood next to Yeshua.

Yeshua gently rested his hand on the girl’s head. “Child, can you hear me speak?”

But the girl glanced about the crowd nervously, oblivious that she was being spoken to. Yeshua touched her chin and turned her head to face him. “Can you hear me speak, child?”

She pointed to her ear and shook her head, then dropped her eyes to the ground in humiliation.

Suddenly, the two Pharisees pushed through the crowd. “This child is deaf because of the sins of her father! It is the just punishment of God!”

The crowd argued among each other. Todd just stood their musing at such silly superstition.

“This child was not born deaf to punish the father,” Yeshua said. “Rather, it was to glorify her heavenly Father.”

“You dare not heal on the Sabbath!” a Pharisee shouted.

Yeshua sighed deeply and gave them a look that seemed to say ‘not again.’ He reached out to the girl and cupped his hands over her ears. He looked to the sky and mumbled a few words, then pulled his hands away. “Child, do you hear me speak now?”

Her eyes bulged. She mouthed incoherent babble and pointed to her ears frantically.

The crowd gasped and chattered as Yeshua’s eyes moved from face to face. “I think that means yes,” he said loudly. He looked back to the girl. “Naturally, you do not understand my question. Now that you can hear, you must learn the language. I believe your family would be delighted to teach you.” He gestured for the father to come retrieve his daughter.

Yeshua turned to the Pharisees. “As I have said before, it is most certainly lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

The Pharisees returned Yeshua’s comments with angry shouts and gestures.

Just then, Jairus, the guy whose dead daughter Todd had examined a few days earlier, stepped onto the scene with worried pleading eyes. “Gentlemen, please, as one of the rulers of this synagogue, I urge you to leave this man in peace. He healed my daughter from the dead. Such a prophet does not deserve such harassment.”

“We will see how long you rule this synagogue,” one of the Pharisees said. He motioned to the others. They each huffed at Jairus and stalked away, kicking angrily at the hem of their black robes.

Todd eyed the scene suspiciously. This guy called Jairus was in on the act. After the sick stunt with his twin daughters, now he set this demonstration up by coaching that girl to play deaf. It was a decent acting job for a kid. It was realistic that she couldn't speak even after being healed. But it was still an act. Any time now, they would pass the basket around and take up the cash. Todd faced Eleazar. "Is that what you brought me here to see?"

Eleazar's hands were on the shoulders of another child. This one was about ten, a boy this time. "I assumed you would think that last healing a stunt. But this should impress you." He squeezed the child's shoulder. "Hold out your arm, child."

Todd looked down at the kid's arms. One arm was whole. The other was a dangling sleeve.

"There is no need to fear," Eleazar said to the boy. "He is a physician."

The kid reluctantly raised his stub and the sleeve fell away. Where the elbow should have been, there was just a rounded, skin-covered nub.

"Please, Dr. Heller. Examine the child's arm."

"I'm looking at it now. I don't need to poke at it. It's obviously a birth defect. Sometimes blood gets cut off and the limb doesn't fully develop. Then again, there could be a genetic reason."

"What then, Dr. Heller, do you prescribe for treatment? A salve? An injection?"

"A prosthetic. That's all you can do. Now I hear some talk about stem cell research. Some day they may be able to regenerate organ tissue. But other than a hook-hand and a pep talk, I'd say nothing can be done about this."

“With God, all things are possible,” Eleazar said. “Normally, Jesus heals the common diseases—blindness, cancer, paralysis, leprosy, dropsy. These are all common ailments here. But the healing of those diseases is not as dramatic as the healing of an arm that does not even exist in its entirety.”

“Yes, that would be dramatic, because that’s impossible.”

“Go, child,” Eleazar said and nudged the kid forward. “Go to the healer.”

The kid nodded and moved uneasily over to Yeshua, just as another man danced away, rejoicing.

Todd suddenly felt a little queasy. Maybe it was something he ate.

“Are you well, Todd?” Eleazar said. “Your face is losing its pinkish hue.”

“It was probably that goat cheese you fed me for breakfast. Look, aren’t we going to miss our boat back to Bethsaida? I wouldn’t want to *walk* back on the Sabbath.”

Eleazar’s eyes glistened with expectation. “Watch, Todd. You need to see this.”

“Look, whose side are you on, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t tell me you really buy all of this. Why did you send that kid up there? Yeshua is just going to make some excuse and leave without taking up the collection. Are you trying to embarrass Yeshua?”

“If Yeshua fails, then you should be delighted. What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid of missing that boat!”

The chattering crowd made a collective gasp and suddenly fell into silence. Todd’s pulse quickened. Unrelenting curiosity slowly swiveled his head around to look. Yeshua held the child’s deformed arm in his hand. The round end of the nub throbbed

with blood and it turned a crimson red. Yeshua held the arm so tight he was cutting off the circulation, that's all. No big deal. Only now, it really did look longer.

Todd swiped his forearm over the sweat building on his nose.

And the arm grew longer.

## Chapter 13

“It’s a trick,” Todd said and closed his eyes tightly. “There’s a string pulling the kid’s sleeve up.” Only now, the kid’s arm was bent at the elbow—an elbow that was not there moments before. The crowd gasped again. The excited chatter grew. So did the arm. It then grew narrower for the wrist, then wider for the hand. Expanding flesh flattened out and sprouted a thumb shaped bulge.

Nausea burned in Todd’s stomach. He cupped his hand over his mouth and broke a hole in the tightly packed crowd. He pressed on into the street. “This can’t be happening.”

“Todd, where are you going?” Eleazar called from behind. “You need to see this!”

The crowd suddenly roared in excitement.

“Don’t tell me what I need to see!” Todd yelled back. He broke into a jog toward the lake. “Stop telling me what to believe!”

Todd dodged peasants and livestock as he made his way back to the boat dock. It was a trick, that’s all. Magicians do it all the time. Todd had no idea how a magician disappears or levitates himself, but they did it nonetheless. Street magicians fooled people right in front of their noses, just like Yeshua.

Todd came to the boat dock and scanned the crowd for Eleazar. It was rude to run off like that, but those people were sucking up all his air. Eleazar would find him soon enough. He always had before.

He walked down the dock and sat on the last stone. He watched the surf beat rhythmically against the stones of the pier.

Eleazar’s voice came from behind. “Why did you run, Todd? You missed an amazing sight.”

Todd glanced over at Eleazar’s shadow. “You found me fast. Did you use your angel powers?”

Eleazar lowered himself to the stone next to Todd. “No, nothing miraculous. I simply followed you here.”

“I never saw that hand grow, by the way. So don’t tell me Yeshua healed his arm. He was just pulling the sleeve up with a string.”

“I assure you the arm was completely restored, all the way down to the fingernails. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Well I didn’t see it. So it’s just hearsay as far as I’m concerned.”

“But you ran away. You could have seen the complete miracle, but you chose otherwise. For the last two thousand years, millions have yearned to see these miracles. Yet you have chosen to look away.”

“You know good and well why I didn’t want to see it.”

Eleazar did not answer.

“If I see a miracle, it only places doubts in my belief.”

“What belief? You believe in nothing.”

“That’s right. And when I die, that’s what’s going to happen—nothing. It’ll be just like before I was born.”

“When you were a young intern, there was an old man that had died and come back to life. He told you of the wonders he had seen beyond the grave. Yet you chastised him cruelly and told him his was only hallucinating because his brain was starved for oxygen.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Even if you did not believe in life after death, why could you not simply let that poor suffering man believe? You knew he was terminal. What harm would it have done to let that man have hope in the face of certain death?”

“Look, Eleazar, after your little sermon the other night, I did *ponder the possibilities*. And the conclusion I came up with wasn’t very pleasant. Do you have any idea what a rotten person I’ve been according to Christian standards? If there is a hell, then I’ll be first in line. Well, maybe behind Hitler. But I’d still be in that line. What comes around goes around.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Todd.”

“Oh, don’t tell me. All I’ve got to do is mumble a little prayer and then I go to heaven. I’ve heard that line a dozen times. I’m telling you it can’t be that easy. That’s not the way the universe works.”

“But it is that easy. If you are sincere in your repentance, if you sincerely change your ways, it is that easy. The terms of surrender are very clear. All you need do is mean what you say.”

“Right there, Eleazar. You just said it. There’s the fine print. I have to change my ways. If I could do that, I wouldn’t have lost both of my wives. You think I like being this way? It’s in my genes,” he said, his voice cracking.

“You have never asked to be changed. God can change you. But you must first allow him to do so. Only the Maker can fix what he made. You need only agree to be fixed. Only then will you be at peace. Only then will you be happy. For happiness only comes from fulfilling your purpose. And your purpose is to serve the one who put you here. Consider yourself to be like a stone chisel. The purpose of a tool is to serve the man who fashioned the tool. And like this chisel, by serving your Creator, you can shape the world into a better place. You need only allow yourself to be used just as the chisel allows itself to be used to shape the stone.”

“There is no God,” Todd said. A sour burn came to his throat and he hunched over, trying not to vomit into the clear waters of the Galilee. “There is no God!”

Eleazar placed a comforting hand on Todd’s shoulder. “Just because you don’t like the way God runs this world does not mean he does not exist. You can deny it, but that will not change reality. Yes, there is a struggle between good and evil. This world is caught within that struggle. There are consequences to war. But you can choose sides.

You can help make the world a better place. Choose life, Todd. If anything, do what is logical.”

“Logic? One day I’m arguing with my ex-wife in the ER parking lot and the next thing I know, I’m 2,000 years in the past pulling fish out of the Galilee. Is that your idea of logic? Tell me what your logic is.”

Just then, the boy who had his arm healed by Yeshua stepped up to the edge of the Galilee. With wide eyes and a big grin, the kid reached down to the shore and picked up a flat stone. He put the stone in his *other* hand and hurled it across the lake. He watched it skip, once, twice, three times before it sank.

Eleazar looked to Todd for his response.

Todd sighed deeply. “It must be the kid’s twin brother.”

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Later that week, Todd knelt beside a perplexed, middle-aged woman. She persisted to spin wool for fabric, despite Todd’s unwanted intrusion on her productivity.

“You see,” Todd said, pointing at his sandal clad foot. “I need a cloth that enfolds the foot completely. I need it to come up past the ankles and just under the calf. Cotton, if you’ve got it. Where I come from, they’re called socks. Of course, I’ll need two.”

Eleazar stepped up to Todd holding two animal hides filled with liquid. “Come, Todd, leave that poor woman to her labor. We have a long journey ahead of us.”

“That’s why I want the socks. You got any idea how irritating that thong running between my toes is? It’s rubbing my skin raw. Not to mention the havoc the rest of those sandals are reaping on the rest of my feet.”

“Your pampered, baby-soft feet will adjust. In fact, I can see that they are already well on their way in becoming worn and gnarly.”

“Oh, you’re a real comedian.”

“Come, Todd. We have lost wages for taking half of this day off. Let us not waste any time.”

“Fine,” Todd said as he took the animal skins. “Any chance there’s some of that honey-wine in one of those skins?”

“Sorry, just water. I need you to be completely lucid today.”

“So where are we headed that I need to be so lucid?”

“We are going to a desolate place west of here. It is across the Jordan, south along the Galilee, and then up into the hills. As for what we are going to see, I do not wish to ruin the surprise.”

“Great, more surprises. Hey, by the way, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

“And what is that?”

“You’re right. I’m convinced. This is all real and there is a God. I can’t believe I’ve been so blind. I’ll be good from now on. So can we skip this little journey and go back to Livingston now?”

Eleazar grinned with amusement. “Todd, you are not completely bad. One of your virtues has always been your honesty, even though you are at times brutally honest. Now I see why you have always chosen the honest approach.”

“And why is that?”

“It is because you are such a terrible liar.”

“You think I’m lying?”

“I think we are making progress. But you still have serious doubts. Come, follow me. Let us remove your remaining doubt.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not if you want to eat this evening.”

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They followed a trail, navigating high ground through marshes that eventually wound its way to a narrow, shallow part of the Jordan River. Once they crossed the Jordan, they passed through Capernaum and fell in behind a caravan of travelers also heading south. Apparently, these peasants were traveling to the Big City. The City of David, they called it. There was a big shindig down there and people traveled from afar to attend. It was as if it was the Super Bowl, only here they called it Passover.

Two sword-wielding men strode along behind another man with a sword strapped to his back and riding a very gassy camel loaded down with supplies for the journey. One of the men had a gaping tear in the back of his tunic. The proliferation of weapons was unnerving. But over the past few days, Todd had heard enough stories to understand the

mentality. Bandits roamed the hills, especially at night. Once a man was carried into town in a donkey pulled cart, bleeding, bruised, dehydrated, and buck-naked. The poor sap made the mistake of being caught on a trail alone at night. He'd been beaten and robbed of everything, even the clothes on his back.

"Eleazar," Todd said discreetly, trying not to rouse the attention of the sword carrying men ahead. They could be one of those bandits. "Don't you think I should be carrying a sword? This place is worse than South L.A."

"You have God and his angel to protect you for now. Besides, if I gave you a sword, you would only cut yourself."

Todd sulked as they walked in silence. Suddenly, two more sword-baring men ran past him and joined the band following the camel.

"Herod, he, he, ....." The man panted as he caught his breath. He was actually no more than a boy, sixteen at the most. He strode a few more steps and the other teenager who ran with him stately flatly, "John is dead. Herod took his head."

The other men gasped in anguish and gripped their sword handles. Todd slowed his pace to increase his distance, just in case they decided to lash out in anger.

"They took his head!" the out of breath teen said, choked with emotion. "They took it to Herod on a platter!"

"That devil!" one of the men shouted and ripped his sword from his sheath. "When Messiah comes we will have our revenge!"

"Messiah may be here already," the man with the torn tunic said. "This man who is called Yeshua. They say he has great power. This could be the Messiah we have awaited."

The sword brandishing man returned his blade to its sheath. “The healer from Nazareth? Is that the man of whom you speak?”

“That is the man,” Torn Tunic said. “The hand of God is with him.”

“Surely you are mistaken, brother. For nothing good can come out of Nazareth.”

“It is rumored that he was not born in Nazareth,” Torn Tunic said. “But rather he came out of Egypt, from the land of the Pharaohs.”

Finally, the man from the camel spoke. “I have heard this as well. They say that as a child, Messiah fled Bethlehem for Egypt. Herod slaughtered all male children under the age of two. I was four at the time. My brother was a year old. Mother weeps for her son even today.”

The sword wielding man pulled his sword again. “That devil and his father will both pay for their treachery! And all of Rome as well!”

“Yes, when Messiah comes they will all pay,” Camel Man said. “What miracles Messiah will perform. On that day, the skies will open and the earth will quake. Nations will tremble with fear. Those who will not submit to the rule of Messiah will be conquered effortlessly.”

“And the land will drip with oil, honey, and wine,” Torn Tunic said. “A single grape will pour forth so much wine as to fill an entire cruse. Stoves will not even be needed. Bread will grow directly from the grain stalks, ready to be eaten.”

Todd couldn't take any more of Torn Tunic's flair for the dramatic. He and Eleazar dropped back out of listening distance. “So what's with those guys?”

“They are Zealots,” Eleazar said. “They are angry because Herod has executed John, the man who foretold of the coming of Jesus.”

“So what did John do to deserve that?”

“John preached the word of God to Herod and his wife.”

“For that Herod cut his head off? And you think I’m a jerk.”

“I did not say that.”

“But you thought it.”

“As I was saying,” Eleazar said. “Those men are zealots.”

“So you do think I’m a jerk. Go on, you can tell me. Everyone thinks I am.”

“I think you *act* like a jerk. What you are is much more complex than a mere behavior. But that is a behavior you can change.”

“I told you I can’t change. I’ve tried, but I always go back to what comes natural.”

“Baby steps, Todd. Trust in God and let him do most of the work. It is not by your efforts, but by faith that you will change.”

Todd didn’t want to hear that nonsense again so he changed the subject. “So what about these zealots?”

“Pardon me. My concern for your eternal soul got the best of me again. As I was saying, zealots want to overthrow Rome by force. This act against John, the high taxes, pagan idol worship, these are only a few of the reasons they want to overthrow Rome. They eagerly await the Messiah, whom they envision will lead their bloody revolt against Rome.”

“Then they’re in for a rude awakening. This Yeshua you say is Jesus doesn’t fit the bill of a bloody conqueror.”

“Indeed. Jesus is the Messiah, but to the disappointment of men such as these, Jesus’ goals for humanity stretch well beyond the borders of Israel and beyond the confines of the flesh.”

After a few minutes, they came across several fishing boats that were anchored at the shore. Some of the pilgrims had diverted from the path south and headed up into the hills.

“Here,” Eleazar said. “That boat there belongs to Simon. They must have moved up into the pastures.”

Todd and Eleazar started up the slight incline of a grassy hill.

“We’re getting out in the boonies,” Todd said. “What are we supposed to do for food? I’m already starved.”

“I have arranged dinner plans already,” Eleazar said.

They followed the pilgrims up the steady incline. More pilgrims streamed in from behind. Wherever they were heading, it was for something big, this surprise Eleazar didn’t want to ruin.

Finally, they topped the hill and the party came in full view. Thousands of men congregated in a grassy field that was sloped slightly to form a natural amphitheater, reminding Todd of an outdoor rock concert. Dozens of pack animals stood idly by, munching on the green grass. Travel supplies held in baskets and bags littered the space in between men.

Todd gaped at the scene. “Where did all of these people come from?”

“Some came from surrounding villages,” Eleazar said. “Most of them are traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. Typically, it is mostly men that travel to Jerusalem

for festivals. There are over five thousand men here, yet still some women and children. Look there,” Eleazar said and pointed down toward the foot of the hill. It formed the stage of the grassy amphitheater. “Now you see why they have congregated here.”

The sun was setting low against the hills as the afternoon was fast coming to a close. Todd cupped his hand over his eyes to shield the sun and squinted to see the cause of the gathering. Sure enough, there he was again. Yeshua and his favored twelve were the focus of the crowd. People formed a line up to Yeshua while the apostles worked crowd control.

“Come,” Eleazar said. “Let us move in for a better view,”

Todd averted his eyes to the ground. “I can see fine from here.”

Eleazar nudged Todd forward. “And even better so closer in.”

Todd begrudgingly followed Eleazar until they had a better view of the line formed before Yeshua. Some guy on crude crutches hobbled up to Yeshua. After a touch from Yeshua, the man wiggled his toes and tested his feet cautiously. Predictably, the guy then threw his crutches aside and started dancing a jig as tears spilled from his gleeful eyes. It was good acting, but it could have easily been faked.

Behind the dancer was a man lying in a stretcher carried by two other men. And then there was the guy with the misshapen upper lip, a textbook cleft pallet, easily repaired by minor surgery. Further down the line was some poor sap whose eyes were gummed together with purulent sores. Behind him was a woman that was so hunchbacked she looked like a walking number 7.

A man moved in next to Todd and craned his neck for a better view. His face was swelled up and rounded in the shape of a moon. “That man there is my cousin,”

Moonface said, pointing to the last man in line. He was several paces removed from the other sick and lame. “He is a leper. He has had many treatments, yet even the Greek physicians sold him worthless cures. We have heard marvels about this healer from Nazareth. After having traveled on foot from Gamla, I pray the rumors are true.”

Moon Face moved on and joined his cousin. Todd curiously followed. He had seen pictures of lepers in medical books, but never the real thing. The cousin looked pale and anemic. On his arms, white scales of dead skin sloughed off swollen, disfigured mounds of lumpy flesh. If it was not real, it was impressive makeup.

Moon Face noticed Todd standing beside him. “Once, a physician let his blood on the first, fourth, and sixth day of week. He assured us that this would cure my cousin. Then he took a week’s pay.” Moonface rubbed his whiskers thoughtfully. “I suppose we deserved to be swindled. After all, it was sin that made him ill.”

“Sin had nothing to do with it,” Todd said. “Mycobacterium causes this. Antibiotics would have him cured in a few days. And by the way, you ever had your cortisol level drawn? That puffy face of yours is classic Cushing’s syndrome.”

Moon Face eyed Todd with contempt. “Your words confound me. Do they suggest that you are a physician?”

“That’s right.”

“Swine!” The man spat on the ground by Todd’s feet and moved to his cousin’s other side.

“I warned you to be silent,” Eleazar said. “In this time physicians are often frauds, resented more than admired.”

“Guess I should keep my malpractice insurance current,” Todd said and moved back into the crowd.

A few minutes later, the line had dwindled away. Yeshua had finished his act and seemingly healed all of the sick and lame. The healing of the leper was particularly impressive, the way the caked on makeup just fell away on cue. Still, nothing had happened that couldn't have been staged.

All of the sudden, a disagreement broke out between Yeshua and the apostles. Exasperated, Phillip waved his arms at the crowd as he spoke. “Eight month's wages would not buy enough for each one to have a bite!”

Yeshua just grinned, seeming amused by Phillip's frustration.

Young Andrew came up to Yeshua ushering a sack-toting boy ahead of him. “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish,” Andrew said. “But how far will they go among so many?”

Yeshua thought for a moment. “Have the people sit down in groups of about fifty each,” he finally said.

Yeshua took the sack from the boy and sat down on the hillside. He drew his legs up to his chest and hugged them as he watched the progress. The apostles spread out into the crowd and gave instructions. It took a few minutes, but gradually the massive crowd settled down on the grassy hill, into groups of at least fifty men each.

When the apostles were finished, they rallied in front of Yeshua.

“Shouldn't we be sitting too?” Todd asked.

“In a moment. I want you to see something first. Come closer so you will have no doubt.”

“So what’s our street magician up to now?” Todd said and followed Eleazar closer Yeshua. “Let me guess, he’s going to pull a rabbit out of that bag.”

Eleazar only gazed ahead, emerald eyes almost fluorescing in anticipation.

“I don’t need to see any more tricks, Eleazar. My feet are killing me. I’m going over here to take a load off.”

“Coward,” Eleazar said.

“What did you say to me?”

“So tough on the exterior, so brazen in your actions, yet in truth you are a frightened little boy. Go sit if you insist. However, I did not walk all this way to miss this.”

“I hate you,” Todd said.

Eleazar just smiled, his eyes still fixed on Yeshua.

Yeshua stood up and reached into the bag. He pulled the contents upward to expose five small barley loaves and two puny pickled fish. He held the bag up to the sky and gave a brief thanksgiving prayer. Then he lowered the bag, reached in, and pulled out two of the loaves. A basket lay on the ground a few yards away. “Hand me that basket, please, Phillip.”

Phillip brought the basket over. Yeshua dropped the barley loaves into it as the rest of the apostles stood around arguing with each other. Yeshua then pulled out two small pickled fish and dropped those in as well. He reached in the bag, withdrew the other three barley loaves, and dropped those in as well. That was it. The bag was empty.

“This is what you wanted me to see?” Todd said.

Yeshua suddenly broke into a wide grin. His owlish eyes sparkled as he lifted the bag and dumped a heaping pile of pickled fish and barley loaves into the basket. The apostles gasped and clamored amongst each other. Todd's heart thumped hard in his chest. He stared in silence, grappling for a solution.

Phillip broke into a fit of laughter and hefted the basket away, shaking his head in dismay. He passed out the food out among the first seated group. He laughed harder upon seeing the delighted, yet confused looks on hungry men's faces.

Simon came running up next with his own basket. Yeshua dumped still another heaping mound of pickled fish and barley loaves into that basket and Simon scurried away to pass out dinner. Meanwhile, the other apostles had commandeered more baskets from the crowd. One by one, Yeshua filled their baskets from the seemingly empty sack. It just kept coming from nowhere. It kept coming and coming, heaping mounds of fish and barley bread. From what dimension was Yeshua pulling that fish and bread? Was it a trap door feeding the basket? It couldn't be. Yeshua stood and held the sack off the ground. Yet the fish and bread just kept coming and coming.

Todd felt queasy and steadied himself on Eleazar. "I . . . I don't believe it."

Eleazar helped him to the ground. Todd vigorously rubbed his eyes. He opened his hands and chanced another peak in Yeshua's direction. More fish and barely loaves freely spilled from the bag and filled yet another basket. "It's a trick," he said. "It's got to be a trick."

## Chapter 14

The barley loaves settled Todd's queasy stomach. He passed on the fish. He'd never liked sardines and that's what they looked like—big sardines, bones and all. But the men sitting around him dug right in, stripping the fish bones of meat, licking their fingers as they went.

The apostles were bussing the tables now. They held the baskets out and satisfied travelers tossed in their leftover fish and bread pieces. When the apostles had finished cleaning up, about a dozen baskets lay on the ground, each full to the brim with leftovers.

It was late and people packed their things to be on their way. A man with a foot long gray beard emerged from the crowd and stepped over to the baskets. "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world!" he loudly declared.

People argued amongst themselves, some in agreement with the man's words, others not so sure.

Yeshua gathered his apostles for a talk. Then the apostles started for their boat as Yeshua dismissed the crowd. Once the people had dispersed, without explanation, Yeshua slipped away and wandered up a lonely path, fading into the fast darkening hills.

Todd stepped over to where Yeshua had been dumping food from the bag. In the dim light, he inspected the ground carefully, lightly stomping and kicking at the grass with his feet.

"You will not find any trap doors," Eleazar said. "Besides, as I am sure you recall, he was standing."

"Maybe he used mirrors. They could have hidden a tube from the ground." Todd stomped around again. There had to be some other explanation.

"Maybe he is a mass hypnotist," Eleazar said. "Perhaps he made five thousand people only *think* they were eating until their stomachs were full." Eleazar picked up one of the full baskets and set it at Todd's feet. "Maybe you only *think* there is a basket full of bread and fish pieces in front of you."

"Stop patronizing me!" Todd yelled. "Just leave me alone!"

Eleazar's face tensed with determination. He wasn't going to let up.

"You just don't get it, do you, Eleazar? If all this is real, if there really is a God, then that makes me the worst kind of loser, even worse than Jake Simon. You got any idea how that makes me feel? Not only was I wrong all my life, but I'm totally screwed in the next life. I haven't exactly been a saint. Those Ten Commandments you Christians hold so dear, I guarantee you I've broken every one. *Every one!*"

“Surely you have not committed murder.” Eleazar said.

Todd did not answer.

Eleazar asked again, alarm rising in his voice. “Have you?”

“As an intern, I performed three abortions. Most Christians would consider that murder.”

“I see,” Eleazar said. “But clearly you do not make a habit of worshiping idols.”

“No, but money was all I cared about. Money and the things money could buy. That was pretty darn close to worship.”

“You have a point. But, I can see that you really care for Laura. Surely you have not—”

“Adultery? Not on Laura, but I cheated on my first wife. Now you see why she divorced me.”

Eleazar nodded knowingly. “What you say may be true, but according to the terms of surrender, as long as you repent, the number and severity of your sins is irrelevant. You are sorry, are you not? Would you not do things differently if you had the chance?”

“Of course I would. What kind of question is that?”

“Your anger and self loathing is a consequence of guilt. However, what you have just now done is confess these sins. And though you don’t realize it, you have just repented of your sin. That is part of the process of becoming a Christian. You need not deserve forgiveness. It is not your goodness that saves you, but God’s goodness.”

Todd kicked the basket over and spilt the bread and fish pieces onto the ground. “I told you to leave me alone!”

“Very well, Todd. I will leave you alone to fend off bandits and wild animals with your bare hands. However, I am taking a boat back to Bethsaida. I invite you to join me.”

Eleazar turned and followed the other apostles toward the shore.

“Wait up,” Todd said and hurried to Eleazar’s side.

“Have you reconsidered?”

“Like I had a choice.”

Eleazar stopped his advance “You always have choices. If you truly want to believe in God, I need not show you miracles. The evidence in nature and history are overwhelming. The only thing God could do differently is to show himself in all of his power and glory and frighten you into submission, therefore turning you into a slave. However, God would rather that men have free will. He prefers worship out of love rather than fear.”

“You call this free will? I didn’t ask to be here.”

“Your detainment is only temporary. You will go back into your body at the same time you left. So in truth, I have not taken up one minute of your time.”

“Okay, Eleazar. I’ve seen it already. When I’m an old fart in a nursing home, I might even look back fondly on this adventure. But for now, could you please just take me home?”

Eleazar sighed deeply, his emerald eyes losing focus and falling to the ground. “We should work one more day as it will give Zebedee time to replace us. It is also not right to leave Zebedee and the rest of the people without explanation. Otherwise, they may believe we were attacked by bandits. If by morning you still want to go home, we will tell everyone of our intentions and then leave.”

A wave of relief washed over Todd. Finally, an end to this nightmare. “I guess I’ll survive one more day.”

“Let us hurry, then. We can catch the boat back to the other shore. Who knows, perhaps you will even see something that will change your mind.”

The sun had just withdrawn behind the western hills. The sky was deep blue and the first stars of the night shown faintly behind the light of a brilliant full moon. Todd and Eleazar had made the short distance back to the shore as strong gusts of wind blew from the lake, making them work for every step. On the shore of the Galilee, a band of ten travelers stood idly by. Two donkeys with caged doves strapped over their backs huffed and snorted, impatiently pawing at the ground. Men from one of Zebedee’s boats sorted through a basket of bread, picking out the largest torn pieces, inspecting them for bite marks under bright moonlight. They kept the largest morsels and tossed the rest into the lake.

One of the fishermen glanced up to Eleazar. “What do you think, Eleazar? Could we eat all of this before the bread grows black with mold?” He tossed a fish head with its dangling skeleton into the water. He scooped another handful of crumbs from the bottom of the basket and tossed them into the water. “We shall make the fish fat and feast on them later.”

Another four men lumbered to the lake hefting two heavy baskets of leftovers between them. They set the straining baskets next to the donkeys and sorted through the remains. “Throw the fish heads into the lake and put the small scraps into a bag for animal feed,” one of the travelers said.

Todd stepped over to Zebedee's crew. "Why didn't you guys tell me you were coming over here? I could have caught a ride with you instead."

The guy with the missing front teeth glanced up as he tossed another fish head into the lake. "Because we don't like you," he said and cackled through the gaping gap in his mouth. Then the other men started laughing.

Todd stepped forward with clinched fists. "You're about to lose another tooth!"

The men laughed even harder and went back to their business.

Todd relaxed his hands and swallowed his empty threat. He moved slowly to the edge of the lake and squinted into the wind. By the light of the brilliant moon, he could see the apostles wrestling with the oars, staining against the wind.

Eleazar stepped beside Todd. "Ignore them, Todd. They will not trouble you after tomorrow."

"It's sad, really," Todd said.

"What do you mean?"

"I agree with them. I don't like me either."

"Your Creator loves you. That is all that need concern you."

Todd quickly changed the subject. "I hope this wind dies down soon. If this keeps up, we'll be all night getting to Bethsaida."

"It is better than taking our chances on the road at night."

"Come, Eleazar," the toothless man said. "We are ready to set out. Bring your sulking servant if you must."

Once everybody was aboard, the men lowered the sail and tucked it away under a bench seat. Four of the men took the oars and strained against the waves, inching the boat

along the waters against the wind. “With any luck,” toothless guy said, “we shall be home before the cock crows.”

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Todd fell back and used his weight to heave the oar through the stubborn, choppy waters. His back, arms, and thighs burned with fatigue. But they were making progress. The mountainside loomed ahead in the pale light of the moon.

“We will take the oars now,” a voice from behind said.

Todd and Eleazar gratefully moved to the rear of the boat and fell against the side of the boat. Eleazar gazed up into the stars as he recovered. Todd just sat there with his eyes closed, taking slow steady breaths, riding the relentless rise and fall of the waves.

“I wish I could put into words what you are passing up.”

Todd opened his eyes and let his head roll towards Eleazar. “You say something?”

“Heaven,” Eleazar said. “I wish there was a way to describe in words the glories of Heaven.” Eleazar drew closer to Todd to conceal his words from the other fisherman.

“This boat reminds me of an analogy I use to compare Heaven to Earth.”

“Aren’t you tired, Eleazar? I’m about to pass out over here. Can’t this sermon wait till morning?”

“Consider Earth like a small life raft with limited provisions, bobbing aimlessly about the ocean, assaulted relentlessly by searing sunlight. It is also surrounded by hungry sharks. Consider Heaven to be like lush land filled with music, gardens, and

temperate climate all year long. You cannot, with your human senses, fathom the glories, the richness of life, the sense of purpose, the sense of belonging that this Heaven offers. The only life you know is the empty landscape of water, dwindling supplies, and hungry sharks waiting for you to fall overboard. There is a ship passing by you now, offering you a free ride to the shores of paradise. Jesus is the captain of that ship. You have a choice. Get on board that ship or get eaten by the sharks of this world.”

“That’s a great analogy, Eleazar. Did you make that up yourself?”

“I did, actually.”

“And if I believed in this Heaven you spoke of, your analogy would have made an impact.”

“You need a bigger miracle? More proof?”

“I told you, I just want to go home.”

Eleazar studied the moon. Then he looked back out across the lake toward the shore they’d departed from hours earlier. He looked up to the moon again, then back to the other shore.

“Eleazar, what in the world are you looking at?”

“I am trying to decide what time it is, judging the position of the moon, relative to the land. I would say that according to your time measurement, it is close to three in the morning. It is almost time.”

“Time for what?”

“For the ship to pass,” Eleazar said, furtively glancing around the boat as a smile crept into his lips. He looked back to the other shore, and his grin grew wider.

Todd stared into the moonlit distance and strained to see Eleazar's source of amusement. He couldn't see anything but waves and whitecaps. He looked back to Eleazar—then snapped his head back around.

Goose bumps sprouted on his arms and the roots on his scalp tensed.

## Chapter 15

“What’s wrong?” Eleazar said. “You look as though you have seen a ghost.”

Todd dug his knuckles into his eyes and dared another peek. It was even closer now.

“Look there!” one of the other fishermen shouted. The rowing men tossed their oars aside peered into the dark, choppy waters. Two of the other men awoke confused from their slumber, panicked eyes moving about the boat and waters.

“It is a ghost!” the toothless one shouted. “God save us, it is a ghost!”

“No, it is not a ghost at all,” Eleazar shouted over clamoring, terrified fishermen.

“Look closer. It is our Lord! It is Yeshua!”

The men gasped and fell silent as recognition dawned. Todd just gaped at the approaching apparition strolling effortlessly on the water, rising up and down with the rise and fall of the waves. The wind whipped at his cloak and his dark hair flowed freely in the wind. Yeshua just kept walking, clearly visible by the light of the moon. He offered a friendly wave of his hand as he strolled on past.

Todd fell back against the sidewall of the boat. Nausea burned in his stomach. Everything the Bible said was true. If there was a heaven, there must also be hell.

A wave thrust the boat upward and then swiftly brought it down. Todd lurched forward and cupped his hands over his mouth. The boat rose sharply and then swooshed down again. The contents of Todd's stomach heaved upward and out onto the boat floor. He vomited again, followed by a quick series of empty dry heaves. He fell back against the sidewall and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. And then he lost it. He broke into bitter sobs, embraced by the comforting arms of Eleazar.

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The winds had finally died down and they arrived safely at Bethsaida. A couple of hours later, Todd found himself sitting on the back of a wooden transport cart, gazing out into the dimly lit marsh. Zebedee needed to learn to lock his kitchen better. He lifted the stolen wineskin to his lips and let the last drops drip onto his eager tongue. Stealing was a sin, but what did that matter now? Would hell get any hotter because of one more sin?

He glanced over at the hills behind him. Sunlight broke over the hillside and streaked into the village with well-defined rays. Right on cue that blasted cock crowed in

the distance. Eleazar was dozing in their quarters but Todd hadn't slept a wink. How could he, after what he'd just seen?

Todd slid off the cart and stood uneasily, his reality mercifully numbed by the alcohol. He concealed the stolen wineskin under his cloak and worked his way back to the rooftop shack on top of Zebedee's house, stumbling once when his foot got snagged in a fishing net. He reached the top of Zebedee's stairs and found Eleazar standing there in the open door of the shack, backlit by the burning oil lamp protruding from the wall.

"Trouble sleeping?" Eleazar asked.

"What do you think?" Todd said. He slid the wineskin from under his cloak and handed it to Eleazar as he passed under the doorframe. "Give that back to Zebedee. He can dock my wages." He crumbled onto his mat and pulled the blanket over his head as a shield from the light.

"He will not likely notice the missing wine," Eleazar said. "He will, however, notice your weary and drunken condition. I will tell him you are sick. If he does not believe me, I will simply point to the floor of his boat."

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It was sometime around noon and Todd recovered from the wine on the rooftop steps of Zebedee's house. Before long, Eleazar walked up the steps and stood before Todd with his fists on his hips, reeking of slimy fish.

"We are done for the day," Eleazar said. "We snagged a stone on the lake bottom. The net must be mended before we continue."

"Explain something to me," Todd said.

Eleazar sat next to Todd. “I specialize in explaining things. What is troubling you?”

“Tell me again. Why exactly was I brought here?”

“I have told you several times already. It was Jake’s dying wish.”

“And that’s what I don’t get. I’ve been picking on that guy since the day I met him. Why would Jake have concern for my eternal soul? He should hate me. And he did hate me. I’m sure of it. So what changed? Why on Earth would he want to help me?”

“Why on Earth, you say? Nothing of this Earth made him love you. Rather, it was God that caused him to change.”

Todd sat in silent contemplation. “If I can change,” he finally said, “do you think Laura would take me back?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Of course, that’s what I want.”

“Then you will indeed change. In truth, I have already noticed a change in your demeanor.”

“Congratulations, Eleazar. Your methods are very effective.”

Eleazar’s emerald eyes intensified.

Todd scooted away, afraid he was about to get a hug. “Look, don’t get the wrong idea. I’ll never be a saint. I’ve got my own agenda. I believe because I want my family back.”

“Good, your words reflect true humility. It is noble that you are motivated by love for your family. God can use this. It will give him a foothold.”

“So what now?”

Eleazar got giddy, squirming on that stair like some kid on Christmas morning. “Now you rejoice. Before you were random chance. In your mind, you had no meaning, no future beyond death. You now have eternal purpose. That is good news, my friend.”

“I’m glad you’re so optimistic,” Todd said. “But you’re forgetting something.”

“And what is that?”

“A little something called my past.”

“God no longer remembers your sin. He is simply delighted to have you back.”

Eleazar reached over with both arms and hugged Todd tightly. Todd kept his arms firmly by his own side, caught awkwardly in Eleazar’s firm embrace. The old Todd would have jerked away. Somehow, he felt at ease, comforted by some unknown force, love pressing in from dimensions unknown. Then, strangely, the love from outside seemed to empower him from inside. It made him love back. He relaxed the tension in his arms and *almost* returned Eleazar’s hug. “That’s very tender,” he said instead. “But you can let go now.”

Eleazar released his grip. “Baby steps, Todd. First, you believe, and then you change over time. When a seed is planted, you will not have fruit the next day.”

“Still,” Todd said. “I think we just witnessed another miracle.”

“And what is that?”

“When you hugged me just now—I didn’t punch you in the face.”

## Chapter 16

Eleazar stood up from the stairs and rubbed his arched back. “I so look forward to leaving the flesh. I believe I strained a muscle today. In the morning, we will say our farewells and I will take you home. From there, you will change. You are in spiritual infancy. You need spiritual milk. Find a good Christian church and start growing in the faith.”

But Todd just sat there and gazed at the thatch-covered roof of the carpentry shop across the street from Zebedee’s house.

“Todd? Did you hear what I just said? Tomorrow, I will take you home. Now, of course you will have some recovery in the hospital. You have a severe concussion, some bad bruising, and a broken femur. But in a couple of months you should be back to normal.”

“About that,” Todd said. He couldn’t believe he was about to say this. “Is there any chance I can hang around for a while?”

“I know, Todd. The recovery will be painful. However, leaving your body in a coma while it recovers does nothing to strengthen your character. You can use the time to read the Bible. Use your idle recovery time to grow in your new faith.”

“I’m a big boy, Eleazar. I can deal with the pain.

Eleazar slowly sank back to the stair and sat staring at Todd in dismay. “Then what are you saying? Do you suggest I leave you here in ancient Palestine?”

“Not forever.”

“Todd, surely you jest. You have done nothing but complain from the moment you awoke here.”

“Here’s the way I see it. When Jesus came to Earth it was the biggest event in history. Do you honestly think an arrogant jerk like me wouldn’t want to be a part of that? That way I could hobnob with the big boys, the most important men that ever walked this planet.”

“But, Todd, you have already done that. Why prolong your discomfort? Go back to your air conditioning before summer arrives.”

“I can’t do that, Eleazar. I’m ambitious. I didn’t get to be captain of the football team, class valedictorian, and then go on to be a doctor without being driven.”

Eleazar started to object but Todd waved him off.

“Now, hear me out and this will make sense. If God is actually real then real success means advancing in the ranks of Heaven. And what better way than to buddy up with the Boss’s own Son? Don’t you see? The egomaniac in me wants to stay. Besides,

you said I needed to grow in the faith. Who could teach me better than the Author of that faith? Maybe then I can go back and Laura will see a change in me.”

Eleazar leaned back on his elbows and shook his head side to side in disbelief. “For centuries now, I have observed humans. Yet, they never cease to amaze me. Are you certain about this?”

“Hey, you’re the one that brought me here. I thought you’d be happy.”

“Do you have any idea what the glories of Heaven are like? No, of course you don’t. But that is what I left for this. Living within the limitations of flesh is very trying for me. It is much better in the spirit.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You sound like me, whining to go back home!”

“If you only knew the glories I left for this, then you would understand. The luxuries you left in 2008 are laughable compared to living in Heaven.”

“You’re not going to let me stay, are you?”

Eleazar fingered his rough tunic and wiggled his dirty toes in his sandals. “The decision is not mine to make. Tonight, I will confer with the Father. Only he can allow you to stay.”

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The rooster crowed and Todd’s eyes flew open. Eleazar sat on the floor. He used the flame from a lamp to warm dates in oil atop a flimsy metal pan. Todd rolled into Eleazar’s shadow as a shield from sunlight spilling into the room.

“There must be some ground rules,” Eleazar said, carefully testing the date for warmth with his finger. “First, you must shadow me at all times. Say little to the apostles. Only speak when spoken to. And do not trouble Jesus. He has the entire human race to save. He was kind enough to let you stay here so do not test your good fortune. And whatever you do, do not get involved when you witness future miracles. The last thing we need is for the Gospels to make note of a certain Todd Heller, servant of Eleazar.”

Todd sat up and scratched at his disheveled hair. “That would be something, wouldn’t it?” Todd grinned mischievously. “Having my name in the New Testament.”

“Do not even consider it. Not if you truly want to stay.”

“So it’s official? I can stay?”

“For a while. But if you are not to be noticed, you must act the part. And that means you must learn the part. Christianity by the standards of your day does not exist here. If you are going to fit in, you must become a proselyte. In other words, you must be a Gentile convert to Judaism.”

“In other words I have to be a Jew. I bet Jake’s laughing out loud over this.”

Eleazar cocked his head to the side, as if hearing a faint voice. “No, he is not laughing. It is more of a snicker.”

Todd smirked at Eleazar. “For an angel, you’ve got a sick sense of humor, you know that? Still, I guess he deserves to laugh after what I put him through.”

“That he does,” Eleazar said. “But you will not treat people like that anymore. You will change—eventually.”

“I don’t feel much different yet.”

“You did not become who you are overnight. You will not change overnight either.”

“That’s why I asked to stay here. I figure this is the best way to strengthen my faith. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, I do agree. You have chosen wisely. But as I said, if you want to closely follow this band of Jews, you must become one of them.”

“So what does that entail?”

“Fortunately for you, God was merciful and formed your body already circumcised, just as you were in Livingston. Any other Gentile convert would have to suffer that first. All you need is to be baptized and become versed in the law. Baptism is easy enough. When the time is right, we will baptize you in the Jordan. But the law is another matter altogether.”

“So what’s so hard about that? There’s only ten of them. And I don’t kill, don’t *usually* steal. The honoring my parents part is going to be tough.”

“You don’t understand, Todd. The Ten Commandments are no doubt the most important of the laws, but they are only a fraction of the total legal system. There is a whole host of dietary, sanitary, and civil laws that must be obeyed, laws given by God for the good of society.”

“Like circumcision? I don’t recall that being one of the Ten Commandments.”

“Yes, circumcision falls into this category.”

“I can tell you circumcision is a good idea. I’m always getting some old coot in the ER with an infection that could have been avoided if he’d been circumcised. Not to mention the infections that get passed on during sex.”

“And there are still other laws designed to limit the risk of infection. Most of these laws will seem common sense to you, but you still must learn the exact procedures none-the-less.”

“If I can get through medical school, I think I can handle an ancient code of ethics. Seriously, how hard could it be?”

“In its original form, it was difficult enough. You must understand that the true law is that which was given to Moses, which is written in the first five books of your Bible. The problem is that rabbinical interpretations of the law have needlessly complicated matters. Over the years, rabbis and scribes have invented specific prohibited acts which are listed under thirty-nine different headings, such as sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, and so on. Because of the Pharisees and Sadducees, you must be very diligent indeed to memorize and follow every detail of the law as they have interpreted it.”

“It can’t be that complicated, Eleazar. If these toothless peasants can keep it all straight, I think I can manage.”

“Very well, I will be specific. One of the thirty-nine categories involves transferring an object from one domain to another. For instance, if a beggar stands outside your home and reaches into your house and takes some food from your hand, the beggar has violated Sabbath law, but you would be innocent. If, on the other hand, you stretch your arm outside to the beggar and hand him something, you have violated Sabbath law, and the beggar is innocent.”

“That’s ridiculous. So the only way this beggar is going to eat is by one of the two breaking the law?”

“Not exactly. There is a loophole. The beggar can reach into the home, but he cannot take anything from your hand. He must open his hand palm up and allow you to place it into his hand, rather than his taking it from your hand. That subtle difference makes the act of charity legal. It is all of these subtle differences that you must know in order to keep from violating the Sabbath laws.”

“So how does everybody remember all of that?”

“By the oral tradition. Many men have the entirety of scripture memorized. Do not worry, Todd. Until you are well versed in the Law, I will supervise you. In the meantime—”

“I know,” Todd said. “Do what you do and say next to nothing.”

Eleazar nodded and tested the date for warmth with his finger. Todd snatched the date away and popped it into his mouth.

Eleazar’s lips tightened as he watched Todd chomp on the date he’d carefully warmed for himself. “I think we should start with the Ten Commandments. We will begin with commandment number eight.”

“Oh, yeah,” Todd said, licking the oil from his fingertips. “And which one was that?”

“Thou shalt not steal.”

## Chapter 17

Todd chewed on a piece of fish as he watched tiny points of light sporadically appear on the far shore of the lake, torch fires to light the streets of Tiberius. It was cool, breezy spring when Todd had arrived in ancient Palestine. It was summer now and locals had shed the outer layers of their wardrobe. The pigment of their faces had turned a deeper tan. Todd would never take air conditioning for granted again.

Jesus had continued his ministry around Galilee. When possible, Todd and Eleazar went out to see Jesus preach. Often they had to stay and help Zebedee fish, especially since some of his men had become disciples of Jesus. One time half of Zebedee's men followed Jesus up to the cities of Tyre and Sidon.

Todd now sat along the eastern shore of the Galilee, in what was known as the Gentile Decapolis, technically out of the territory of the Jews, where pagan Roman and Greek culture dominated. Farmers grazed pigs for food without the slightest concern for Jewish dietary laws. These pagans of the Decapolis, roughly 4,000 of them, sat around in groups, chowing down on fish and bread after having exhausted their supplies. For the last three days they had camped out with Jesus and the apostles, listening to him preach, quoting scripture so effortlessly, you'd think he wrote it himself. Jesus saw no logic in healing their sick only to have them faint from hunger on their way home. So just like a few weeks earlier when he'd fed the 5,000 Jews making their Passover trek to Jerusalem, Jesus somehow produced an enormous feast from seven loaves of bread and only a few fish.

Clearly, the last few weeks had changed Todd to the core. It wasn't just his rough, fishnet-callused hands, his tangled mess of a beard, and the rest of his mountain man existence to which he had become accustomed. It was more an inner change. In his previous life, his friends, the alcohol, the adult movies, the Internet, they had all stained his brain and clung to it like a bad odor, clouding his thoughts from contemplating the most basic mystery of life—why are we here?

But here in the quiet, simple landscape of ancient Palestine, the stars shined much brighter. It was easier to focus on the spiritual dimensions of existence. Now he knew the ultimate truth—in all of existence, there was God and that which was created by God. There was nothing else. This new reality overshadowed all of his thoughts and actions. It took a little practice, some reminders and coaxing from Eleazar, but now he found that he

could actually be nice to people. And for once in his life, he could honestly entertain the notion that he was almost—what was the word? Happy?

Eleazar walked up behind Todd and sat next to him. “Here you are. I went to fetch some baskets for the leftovers. The next thing I knew you had wandered off.”

“Sorry about that. The view from here is hard to resist.”

Eleazar sat on the hillside next to Todd. “I was impressed at how you handled those men back there. You witnessed to them with the confidence of a true disciple.”

“It’s all an act. Truth is, I feel like a hypocrite. Who am I to tell these guys how to be a Christian?”

“These feeling you have only show that you have grown humble.”

“Don’t tell me that, Eleazar. You’ll just give me a big head. As soon as I think I’ve got this Christian thing down, I start to get proud. Isn’t pride one of the deadly sins?”

“Indeed, it is perhaps the worst of the sins.”

“Then I give up, Eleazar. I just can’t win.”

“No, Todd, you cannot win. That is why you must surrender.”

“Haven’t I already done that?”

“Indeed you have. You have also repented of your sins and you have made great strides in your spiritual maturity.”

“Like I said, I’m ambitious.”

“Indeed. Your salvation is secured. And now baptism will make it official. You had a public marriage with Laura, did you not?”

“It was a church wedding. Her idea, not mine.”

“Just as with your wedding, baptism is a public, symbolic sacrament to symbolize the washing away of your sins. Trust me, after you come out of that water, you will feel much better, like a heavy weight has been removed.” Eleazar reached over and embraced Todd. “In time you will not feel like a hypocrite. In time, you will be at peace with your past.”

“There’s something else you should know,” Todd said, eyeing Eleazar’s arm around his shoulder.

“Yes, Todd.”

“The whole hugging thing. I’m still not into that.”

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They camped in the Decapolis for the night, sleeping on the ground under a borrowed tent. The next day was the Sabbath. They hung out with the Apostles while Jesus healed a few more people and retold some of the parables he’d already told to a different crowd the day before. Fortunately, no pesky Pharisees would dare set foot in gentile territory so Jesus was allowed to do good on the Sabbath without being harassed.

That afternoon, Todd and Eleazar bought a ride on a merchant gentile boat headed for Capernaum. Technically, they’d broken the current interpretation of the Sabbath by traveling so far, but it was the gentiles who worked the sails, gentiles who could care less about Jewish rituals. The plan was to spend the night at Capernaum and head back to Bethsaida the next day, crossing the Jordan on foot.

It was maybe five o'clock when the boat docked at Capernaum. The gentile men climbed out onto the pier. Todd and Eleazar brought up the rear.

"So where are we staying tonight?" Todd said. "It'll be dark soon."

"Have faith," Eleazar said. "Something will present itself before nightfall."

"I don't care where we stay, as long as it's not with that goat."

"But he likes you, Todd. We should pay him a visit."

Something toward the end of the pier caught Todd's eye. A young girl flailed her arms to keep balance. She lost her footing and splashed into the lake.

Todd walked quickly down the pier. Surely she could swim. Bubbles formed at the surface of the water. He broke into a sprint and stopped where the girl had fallen. She wasn't coming up.

## Chapter 18

Todd kicked off his sandals and started to jump. Two black-sleeved arms blocked his path.

“You cannot help her! It is the Sabbath,” the Pharisee said. “If it is the will of God, she will surface.”

“Get out of my way!” Todd shoved the man aside and plunged into the water. Stunned by the cold, he surfaced, gasping for air. He recovered and dove back down. He felt around with his eyes open, burning in silt-filled water. A faint shadow moved below him. He swam further down. Crushing pressure pressed on his eardrums. He spotted her. She thrashed wildly, her eyes wide with panic. Bubbles billowed from her muffled screams. His feet found bottom and he scooped her in by her waist. He gripped her tight

and thrust upward, kicking and pulling at the water with his free arm, clutching the girl with his other arm. He broke the water's surface and sucked in a deep breath.

Eleazar was in the water now, standing on a stone that lay beneath the surface. He extended his hand and helped them out of the water. Todd laid the lifeless girl on the pier and pressed firmly on her abdomen. Water gushed from her mouth. She coughed and sputtered, wiping wildly at her face.

A panic-stricken young man ran up to the girl. "Elizabeth! Elizabeth, my child! I tried to get to you, I did try!" He looked up and glared with contempt at another pack of Pharisees now approaching. "But they held me back!" Tears welled in the poor guy's eyes and he started to hyperventilate. He squeezed his daughter tight. "Oh, child, I thought I had lost you!"

Unfortunately, those Pharisees shattered the tender moment. "We must keep the Sabbath holy," the oldest one said. "By your actions, you have broken the Sabbath. What have you to say for yourself?"

Todd rose to his feet and returned the Pharisee's glare. "Holy? Are you out of your mind? Is it holy to watch a child die? If that was your daughter, which of you would just stand by and watch her drown? You hypocritical prudes suck every ounce of good from the Sabbath!"

The Pharisees gasped in disgust and grumbled among each other. The young father of Elizabeth scooped her dripping form up in his arms and pulled his precious daughter a safe distance away.

Eleazar stepped forward. "Calm down, Todd. We need not enrage them any further. Gentlemen," he said to the Pharisees. "Your interpretation of the law only applies

to fellow Jews. But this man is a Gaul. He is not yet Jewish and does not follow our code. You have no argument with him. Now if you please, we need to get this girl into some dry clothes before she becomes ill.”

“Very well,” the Pharisee with the most elaborate garb spoke. He then turned on the girl’s father. “Innkeeper, I suggest you instruct your daughter to stay away from the water. Next time you may not have this *gentile* to help you.”

Todd pulled back a clinched fist, but restrained himself at the last moment. Decking the guy probably wasn’t the Christian thing to do. He just sneered back as the congregation of black hooded buffoons turned and strolled away.

The father set the child down. “Sir, gentile or not, I am forever in your debt.” He leaned over and embraced Todd. He was so short his round skullcap brushed against Todd’s earlobe. He released his hug and wiped a tear from his cheek with his palm. “My name is Alexander of Cyrene.”

Todd had seen this little guy somewhere before. He had caramel colored skin, a short beard, and fancy striped V-neck tunic with decorative trim. His hair was freshly oiled and curly black with little strands of curls that looked like curly fries dangling in front of his ears. Then he remembered. This was the guy Todd had stolen the beer from.

“Uh, hi, Alexander.” Todd blushed and shifted uncomfortably. If that guy had seen him take the beer, he didn’t act like it. “I just did what anybody would do.” Todd said and stuck out his hand. “Where I come from we don’t hug. We grip each other’s hand and shake it a couple of times.”

Alexander hesitantly took Todd’s hand and shook it up and down twice. “Like this?”

“Just like that,” Todd said and let go. “It’s nice to meet you, Alexander. My name is Todd. Todd of Livingston.”

“Todd of Livingston. An interesting name.”

“Like Eleazar said, I’m a Gaul.”

“Captured by the Romans? Is this your master?” he said and gestured politely to Eleazar.

“You are correct,” Eleazar said. “My name is Eleazar and he is currently my servant.”

“Then consider me at your service as well,” Alexander said. “And Todd of Livingston, where you are from and what religion you practice is of no concern to me. You have saved my daughter from certain death.” Alexander looked down to his daughter, who was bashfully peeking around from behind him. “While in Capernaum, consider my family your family.”

“I appreciate that,” Todd said. “And just so you know, I’m not a pagan. I’m a Christian.”

“Christian? I have not heard of this religion.”

“Let me clarify,” Eleazar said. “My Gallic servant is a follower of Yeshua, son of Joseph.”

“Then we are family, indeed,” Alexander said. “For I, too, though Jewish, follow Rabbi Yeshua. I believe him to be the greatest prophet since Moses.”

“Amen,” Todd said.

“Where are the two of you staying tonight?” Alexander asked.

Todd and Eleazar looked at each other and shrugged. “We have not had time to look for lodging,” Eleazar said.

“Then you will stay with me. I own the largest inn this side of Tiberius. Come! This way,” Alexander said and pointed. “Let us go to my home and give you some warm, dry clothes.”

“If you insist,” Todd said.

“Follow me,” he said and picked up his shivering daughter. “It is not far.”

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The sun had set now. The Sabbath was over and Alexander’s wife, Priscilla, fussed over the evening meal as several other dinner guests sat around on low tables enjoying their lentil stew. An older servant named Timothy helped in the kitchen.

Todd, Alexander, and Eleazar reclined on cushions at the far end of a long table, a comfortable distance from four other guests. In a borrowed linen tunic, Todd enjoyed a cup of halfway decent wine. But two cups was his limit. Moderation was the key.

Alexander rotated his cup and watched the wine swirl. “Those Pharisee’s stick to the letter of the law as if it were their skin. Saving my child on the Sabbath constituted work, which is strictly forbidden for the likes of them.”

“That brings laziness to a new level,” Todd said.

Alexander laughed and finished the last of his wine. “There are good Pharisees as well. It just depends on the man under the cloak.”

“As always,” Todd said. “So, Alexander of Cyrene, do you mind if I call you Alex?”

“No, not at all,” Alex said. “I prefer it. It is what friends should do.”

“I gather you’re from Cyrene?” Todd said.

“It is an important city of Libya, in North Africa. As I am sure you are aware, because of the past conquests of Israel, we Jews are spread all over the Roman Empire. When I was a child, Simon, my father, took my brother, Rufus, and me to Jerusalem. Six years ago, I came to Capernaum to work for my uncle when this inn belonged to him. I soon married Priscilla. Two years ago, my uncle died without any sons. Therefore he left the inn to me.”

“So this is all yours, huh?” Todd said. “That’s a lot to handle for such a young lad. How old are you, anyway?”

“As of three weeks ago, I am twenty-four years of age. However, I must confess that I do have help. Timothy was my uncle’s servant for many years. He is a valuable asset. I could not manage without him or my wife, Priscilla.”

As if taking her cue, Priscilla glided into the room, modest and demure. She filled the cups with more wine from a carafe without saying a word. She was just a child, nineteen at the most. She had straight, raven black hair pulled back under a veil, pristine olive skin, and sheepish brown eyes that refused to make contact with the eyes of another man. And under the midsection of her ankle-length, light blue cloak was a distinct but miniature hump that said she was about three months pregnant.

Alex offered Priscilla a smile of thanks and turned back to his guests. “Todd, you have said you come from a small village called Livingston. But what of you, Eleazar? Where do you call home?”

“I am a bit of a nomad,” Eleazar said. “There is no place on Earth I would call home. Right now my home is in your lovely home. So what of your brother, Rufus?” Eleazar changed the subject with finesse. “Does he still reside in Jerusalem with your father?”

“He does. My father is a stonemason supervisor for Herod. We moved to Jerusalem to help finish Herod’s temple. My brother is also a stonemason.”

“Ahh, so he works to finish the Temple,” Eleazar said. “It is truly a beautiful and remarkable structure. In fact, I hope to take Todd there to see it soon. Perhaps we will go for the Feast of Tabernacles.”

“Then it is settled. You will both travel with me to the Feast of Tabernacles. My father has plenty of space in his home. He will certainly welcome the men who saved his granddaughter.”

“We would be delighted to join you,” Eleazar said.

“Tell me, what are your plans until then?” Alex asked.

“Tomorrow we return by foot to Bethsaida.”

“By foot?” Alex said. “Please, allow me to charter a boat for your return.”

“That is very considerate of you, Alexander, but Todd and I must make a small detour on the way.”

“Detour?” Todd said. “What kind of detour are you talking about?”

Eleazar took a sip of wine and smiled. “You will find out tomorrow.”

The next morning, Todd and Eleazar reclined at the table waiting for Alex to return from morning prayers at the synagogue. Eleazar sat fingering the plump, blue vein on the top of his hand, moving it around under his skin.

“You’ve got good veins,” Todd said. “We in the medical field appreciate that—easy to start I.V.’s.”

“Until now,” Eleazar said, “it had been almost three hundred of your Earth years since I have been assigned to appear in the flesh. I had lost my appreciation for how complex and fragile the flesh can be. Just one misplaced foot on a mountain trail, or something as tiny as a misplaced blood clot, could easily release the soul, the fruit from this fragile shell. So very fragile,” he said again and finally left his veins alone to their work.

“That was very profound,” Todd said. “And speaking of fragile, after a day of walking these hills in leather sandals, my feet would agree with you. Which reminds me, what is this little detour you have for me today?”

“Would you not rather that I surprise you?”

“I’ve come to dislike surprises, thank you.”

Alex came up from behind. “Yes, Eleazar, tell us about this detour. Do not leave us in suspense.” He sat down and removed his phylacteries, the two small leather cubes that held parchments of sacred writing from the Torah. One was strapped to his forehead while the other one was attached to his left arm with a leather strap. Priscilla set a platter of raisin cakes on the table and withdrew back into the kitchen.

Eleazar reached for a raisin cake. “I have been told that one of the disciples of John the Baptist is baptizing new followers of Yeshua in the Jordan today. I thought Todd

could be one of those baptized. After all, Todd, how often does someone from your country have a chance to be baptized by an actual disciple of John the Baptist?" Eleazar sank his perfectly straight teeth into a raisin cake and watched for a response.

"Please," Alex said. "You must allow me to come with you. I, too, would like to be baptized."

"The more the merrier," Todd said.

"Excellent!" Alex clapped his hands loudly. "And I will bring my purse so that I can give an offering for the three of us. I want to show God my gratitude for sending my daughter's savior."

"That's nice of you, Alex." Todd patted his tunic down. "I'm a little short on change at the moment."

"The tax collectors must have fleeced you already," Alex said. "After the taxes from Rome, Herod, and the priests, it is a miracle I have a single coin left for charity. Taxes have so impoverished Capernaum that our synagogue was built using the aid of a Roman centurion." Alex caressed one of the leather phylacteries with his thumb. "I wonder sometimes if God will even hear the prayers offered from such a dwelling."

"I understand this centurion to be a Roman who fears our God," Eleazar said.

Alex clinched the phylactery in his fist. "He is still a Roman, is he not?"

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Todd tagged along behind Alex and Eleazar. They followed the trail leading to the Jordan River. Alex had dressed down for the trip, looking more like a mere fisherman than a well-to-do businessman. Apparently, he wanted to humble himself for the occasion.

When Todd reached the crest of a hill, he stopped a moment and took in the stunning view of the Galilee. The wind blew whitecaps on the waves of crisp blue water.

Suddenly, a rustling noise caught his attention. He snapped his head around toward Capernaum. There was movement from the corner of his eye. Then it was still.

Probably a bird.

Eleazar called from several yards away. "Are you coming, Todd?"

Todd started back down the trail. "Sorry, just enjoying the view."

Alex moved to the shade of a sycamore-fig tree and wiped sweat from his brow.

"We are almost there," Eleazar said. "We have time to rest for a few moments."

Todd lowered himself against the tree. "Amen to that. I'm not as young as you two."

"Eleazar, I must confess," Alex said. "I have difficulty estimating your age. How old are you?"

"I am much older than I appear," Eleazar said with a knowing grin.

"Don't ask," Todd said. "He's very sensitive about his age. So you think there's going to be a crowd at this Baptism?"

"There will be many followers," Eleazar said. "We may have to wait in line."

"There is safety in large numbers," Alex said. "It is no secret that I am a relatively wealthy man. I confess I am uneasy traveling with so much money and so few men."

Todd arched his brows. “Just how much cash are you toting in that purse of yours?”

“Let us just say that I have had a very good year and that I am very grateful for the life of my daughter.”

“And just how much represents a good year?” Todd asked.

Alex opened his mouth to reply. A noise came from behind the sycamore tree. He gripped his purse tight. The other hand reached for the bulge protruding under his tunic.

A violent blow from behind toppled Todd to the dirt. He scrambled to his knees.

Two men in rags overpowered Alex and forced him to the ground. One of the men held a sword to Alex’s neck. “Give us your purse, inn-keeper!”

Eleazar took a defensive stance. “Do not harm him, sir! You can have the money. Alexander, give him your purse!”

## Chapter 19

Alex crimped his lips in resolve and gripped his purse tighter.

“Alexander!” Eleazar cried. “Your daughter was not spared so she could be reared fatherless! Give that man your purse!”

Alex slowly lifted the left side of his tunic and untied the leather pouch that was strapped to his waist. “This money was destined for the ministry of John. You take this from the very hand of God.”

“Then we offer him our thanks,” the other bandit said. And eye patch covered one eye. It was that guy at the manure bonfire with Bucktooth. Eye Patch snatched the purse away and looked inside with his good eye. The bandit holding the sword craned his neck to see, pulling his sword from Alex.

Eye Patch poured coins in his hand. “There is a harvest season’s wages here!”

“Give that to me!” Sword Bandit said.

As the bandits exchanged angry words, Alex unsheathed a small sword he had concealed under his tunic. What was that little innkeeper doing? He’d never take these guys by himself. He’d get them all killed—unless Todd and Eleazar helped. But Eleazar was an angel from God. How could they lose? Todd reluctantly took his cue and nodded at Alex to confirm the plan.

“Now!” Alex shouted.

Todd sprang forward and charged the bandits. Alex came up. He cocked his blade, poised to strike.

Eleazar suddenly jumped between Todd and the bandits. “Stop this!”

Suddenly, Eleazar yelped sharply and lurched forward. Todd stared down in dismay. A bloody blade protruded from Eleazar’s abdomen.

“No!” Alex cried and swung his sword downward.

Eye Patch Bandit caught Alex’s arm in the air. The other bandit jerked the bloody sword from Eleazar’s back. Alex yanked hard to free his arm and at the same time, kicked at Sword Bandit’s stomach. Just as Alex’s foot made contact, the bloody sword came down and sliced into Alex’s thigh.

Alex dropped his sword and Eye Patch let go. Alex collapsed to the ground and gripped his bleeding thigh. “You have the money! Take it and leave us!”

Eye Patch tore into a sprint toward Capernaum. The other bandit scooped up the few coins that had fallen on the ground and ran after him.

Alex grabbed his sword from the ground and stammered to his feet. He brought his sword overhead and gripped his bleeding wound with his free hand. He hobbled after them shouting in Hebrew.

Eleazar gaped down at his chest. He fingered the bloody hole and pulled his hand away to inspect the blood on his fingers. He fell forward. Todd caught him and gently lowered him to the ground.

Todd ripped the scarf from his head, wadded it in a ball, and held pressure on Eleazar's wound. "You'll be alright, Eleazar. You're an angel, remember. Just heal yourself."

Eleazar clutched Todd's hand that was held against the wound. "It . . . it is not that easy." He winced at the pain. "I hate . . . b, being in the flesh. It hurts so bad."

Todd pressed the headscarf tighter into the wound. "Then make it stop! Heal yourself!"

"I . . . I told you, Todd. I am in the flesh now. I have no more p . . . power than you." He coughed violently. Blood spewed from his mouth and flowed down his chin, saturating the dirt to make crimson mud. "Todd . . . I . . . I am not certain I can get you h, h . . . home now."

"Eleazar, you can't leave me here!"

"I will . . . try. It is . . . it is not my decision."

"You'll *try*! Eleazar, you can't do this!"

"There is . . . a reason," Eleazar said and coughed up more blood. "There is always a reason. Just . . . believe. Just *believe!*" Eleazar's grip went limp and his head fell

to the side. His lifeless emerald eyes stared toward the Jordan. The pupils expanded and they appeared to turn a darker shade of green.

“Nooo,” Todd groaned and fell on top of his angelic friend.

Just then, Alex limped back. “They ran too swiftly. I could not catch them.”

Todd fell away from Eleazar’s corpse. “He’s gone.”

Alex collapsed to the ground and grabbed Eleazar by the cuff of his tunic.

“Eleazar! Can you hear me?”

Todd held Alex firmly. “It’s too late, Alex. He’s dead.”

Alex’s face went pale. “This is my fault! I should have known. I should have taken more men!” He reached for the V of his tunic and ripped it apart. He beat on his chest with a bloody fist. “God forgive me, this is my fault!”

Eleazar was an angel. He simply went back to Heaven. No big deal. Poor Alex didn’t know that. Alex was in pain, mentally and physically. Todd put away his own grief and converted to physician mode. “Alex,” Todd said in his best soothing voice. “God has a reason for this. You just have to believe, that’s all.”

“What did Eleazar do to deserve this?”

“I don’t know. Who knows the thoughts of God? But I do know this. There is a reason.”

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Alex bit down hard on the leather strap and squeezed Todd's tunic in his clinched fist. He let the leather fall from his mouth. "You aim to kill me, Todd of Livingston. That burns terribly."

Todd dabbed excess wine off the bloody gash on Alex's leg.

They had caught a ride back to the inn on a donkey drawn wagon that carried grain to Capernaum. It was a sad, creepy journey home riding next to Eleazar's bloody corpse. The whole way home, Alex wouldn't stop blaming himself.

Todd poured another dab of wine on Alex's wound, just to be sure.

"Auuuggghh! What are you doing?" Alex said. "Is this the way they bind wounds in Gaul? By making the wound drunk with wine?"

"The alcohol kills infection causing bacteria." Todd sniffed the jar of wine.

"Well, at least it'll somewhat retard bacterial growth. Unfortunately, unless you've got some antibiotics tucked away in your cupboards, it's all we've got." He took a reasonably clean strip of linen and began wrapping it around Alex's thigh. "Stitches are standard procedure, but that would hurt really bad without Novocain. Just keep this bandage tight and stay off your leg. I'll help around the inn. Just tell me what to do."

Alex handed Todd another strip of linen. "I appreciate that, my friend. I could have used the extra help before this happened."

Todd tied the last bandage around Alex's leg and inspected his handiwork. "This will still get infected, despite the wine. If it gets too bad we can always have Yeshua heal it."

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Eleazar's body was anointed with oil and garnished with flowers. Todd watched somberly as Priscilla and another woman, a neighbor that apparently worked part time as a mortician, wrapped Eleazar's body with long sheets of white linen. He would be placed in a tomb owned by Alex in the rocky hills west of town.

"There is a reason. Just believe," Todd said to himself.

Those were the last words uttered by Eleazar. Unfortunately, he did not leave any clues as to what that reason might be. It could be he didn't know the reason. Angels weren't as omnipotent as humans liked to believe. Philosophically, one had to wonder why God would allow such evil to happen to one of his angels. Eleazar would say that if God had prevented the bandits from doing evil it would have infringed upon their free will. If God had healed Eleazar, then Alex and the bandits would be aware of that miracle. The focus here was to be on Jesus, yet the attention would then be drawn to Eleazar as the living miracle. What if it got around that Todd had healed Eleazar? No, Jesus was the only miracle worker here.

The most gnawing conundrum had little to do with Eleazar. It was why Todd was not allowed to return home. After all, Todd had come to believe in Jesus, and Eleazar was not around to baby-sit anymore. Repeatedly, he had prayed to God for a sign. He had even called out to Eleazar, hoping that he was hovering somewhere near in spirit form. If Eleazar was out there, he wasn't showing himself. Maybe he planned to come back, just not yet. Did he have to put in a requisition for a new body? Do you have to order those from another planet? Maybe it would just take a while longer. Maybe he wouldn't come back at all. If not, then would Todd ever see Laura and Dillon again?

A nervous flutter swept through Todd's gut. He closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples. How was he going to get out of this mess? Why didn't he just go back home when he had the chance? "Eleazar," he said. "If you can hear me, please give me a sign."

The mortician neighbor lady gave Todd an odd look. "A foul odor is the only sign this man will give you."

## Chapter 20

Several days later, Todd saw the last of the guests out of the dining hall. It had been a heavy dinner rush and the place was a mess. Todd's back ached after he had spent the evening waiting tables, bending down to the low table. It would be nice if these ingrates learned the American tradition of leaving tips.

Earlier in the day, he'd trudged through his normal routine. At dawn, he carried the chamber pots to a ditch that served as the local sewer. He put fresh water in the ritual cleansing baths, washed dishes, and changed bedding, although most people just slept in their clothes using their own cloaks for blankets. Todd did such a good job that Alex had given him a full time job. It sure beat fishing. His hideously callused hands were already looking better. Alex also paid better than Zebedee did.

Todd cleaned the dinner hall as Priscilla and Timothy finished up in the kitchen. Before retiring to his downstairs quarters, he went up to the balcony to check on Alex. Alex sat on the outdoor landing in front of their room. Young Elizabeth bounced gleefully on his uninjured leg. Alex noticed Todd coming and whispered in Elizabeth's ear. She promptly hopped down and joined Priscilla inside.

"So tell me, physician, why is it that you had me sit out here with my wound exposed to the night air?"

"It'll heal faster if it stays dry," Todd said. "You get a better breeze from the lake up here. Let me see." He lifted an oil lamp from its slot on the wall and moved it close to Alex's leg. The wound was slightly pink and puffy, but didn't appear to be badly infected. "It looks good. You'll be back on your feet in a few days."

"I am better already," Alex said. "You should let me help you around the inn. Timothy is too old to be of much help and pregnancy has already begun to slow Priscilla."

"Timothy isn't much older than me, thank you. He's still quite helpful."

"Yes, while I recover, I asked him to help with more of the menial chores. He typically focuses on the business side. I would be lost without him."

"I noticed that, young Alex. You need to have him show you how to run the place yourself. You know, since he's an old man like me. He may not last much longer."

Alex laughed. "It appears I have offended you, my friend. I apologize."

"Apology accepted. By the way, I hope you don't mind, but I had to burn a set of your linens today."

Alarm registered on Alex's face. "Todd, those are expensive. Why would you do such a thing?"

"Ever heard of head lice? Those linens were infested. All you can do is burn them." Todd could almost feel them crawling on his scalp that moment.

"Is that a problem?" Alex asked.

"As a physician, I can promise you they are not healthy. We owe it to your guest to burn the sheets."

"As you say, Todd. I trust you with—" Alex shot a pointing finger toward the looming mountain north of the Galilee. "Look there. What do you suppose that could be?"

A shimmering light glowed from the base of the first peak of the mountains. Todd curiously studied the light before answering. "I honestly don't know." He secretly yearned for it to be Eleazar. Maybe angels produced a bright light when they came to Earth. But why up on Mount Hermon?

They both gazed at the light in wonder for a few moments. Finally, Todd spoke up. "I think I know who might be behind that light."

"Yeshua?" Alex said.

"Didn't he travel up that way to preach in Caesarea Philippi?"

"Why yes, he did. Do you think Yeshua could be forming that light?"

"Can you think of another explanation?"

"No, I cannot," Alex said, nodding his head in disbelief. "Amazing. What must he be up to?"

"I don't know. It's too bad we couldn't follow along and see for ourselves."

“Autumn will be upon us soon. During the Feast of Tabernacles, most of the travelers go to Jerusalem. I usually close the inn and travel to Jerusalem myself. Yeshua will most certainly be preaching in Jerusalem then. We will go and stay with my father. I am sure we will see many miracles then.”

“You’d really take me with you?”

“I would not go without you. Timothy will watch after Priscilla and Elizabeth.”

“It sounds like a plan, Alex. In the meantime, I’m hoping Yeshua will swing back through and stay at Simon’s house. Things are always more exciting when he’s around.”

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Todd set down another platter of roasted lamb in front of Alex and six dinner guests. Meat was a luxury to the overtaxed village, but these were special guests. Alex listened intently as they told stories of their adventures. These were not paying guests, either. Room and board was on the house. After all, they were the apostles of Yeshua—six of them, anyway.

Todd took in the scene with fascination. Up until now, aside from that one night at Zebedee’s, he’d mostly seen these guys from a distance. He knew next to nothing about them. However, over the last couple of hours he got a better handle on who these guys were. James and little brother, John, were seated at the head of the table. James was a big boy, a good six inches taller than his little brother was. He looked to be about five years older than young John, who was no older than Alex was. Someone had jokingly

referred to James and John as the Son's of Thunder, so they were apparently a tad hot headed. You wouldn't know it by looking at them now.

The apostle Phillip sat next to Alex. He was the logical, pragmatic one of the group, while Thomas, sitting on the far end of the table, seemed a bit of a skeptic. Nathanael Bartholomew, over there in the middle of the table licking his fingers after each greasy bite of lamb, had a sarcastic wit about him. And next to Nathanael sat curly haired Matthew, formally known as Levi. He seemed to try extra hard to win the favor of the other apostles, laughing a little harder, showing more than the appropriate affection. He did so with good reason. He used to be a tax collector, a class despised by virtually every Jew, not only because they were in cahoots with the Romans, but also because they skimmed money off the top for themselves to support lavish lifestyles. And as a former member of Rome's IRS, Matthew had to keep detailed written records of his transactions. These literary skills proved useful, as Todd had spotted Matthew jotting down the words and actions of Jesus in his own personal journal.

Simon was over at his Capernaum home with his mother-in-law, along with his little brother, Andrew, and Jesus. It was odd that James and John were not with Jesus, since they and Simon seemed to be Jesus' favored inner three. Then again, Simon must have had limited space in his humble Capernaum abode.

Todd knew little about the other apostles. There was the one Alex had once referred to as Iscariot. He was in charge of the petty cash. There was another short guy named James, but Todd knew nothing about the other two, not even their names.

Alex extended a cup of wine to Todd. "Sit down, Todd. Join us."

James pointed to an empty spot on the table. “Yes, Todd of Livingston, leave your work to the women. Tell us what happened to Eleazar. We have heard dreadful things.”

Todd moved uneasily to the table and sat Indian style before Alex and the six apostles. He was frankly surprised they would invite a heathen gentile to the table. If Eleazar hadn’t convinced them Todd was a devout follower of Yeshua, they would almost certainly have nothing to do with him.

“Please,” Matthew said. “Tell us what happened.”

Todd really didn’t feel like chatting up the whole Eleazar ordeal. He’d give a brief summary and change the subject. “There’s not much to tell, really. You know how these bandits can be. We were walking to the Jordan. Alex had brought an offering to support John’s ministry and we got robbed. It got ugly and Eleazar took a sword in the back. He lived only a few seconds.” Todd clinched his jaw as anger and remorse flared at the memory. It was time to change the subject. “By the way, what was that bright light I saw on Mount Hermon the other night?”

James and John eyed each other warily, like their secret was out. The other four apostles suddenly stopped eating and turned to listen.

“How do you know about the light?” John asked.

“I saw it. Alex did too. It was hard to miss. It was like a tiny sun up there. Surely you guys saw it too. Haven’t you been up that way?”

“Indeed, we have,” John said. “However, I was not aware the light could be seen this far south.”

“Please, John, don’t leave us in suspense,” Alex said. “Tell us what you saw.”

John stalled for an awkward moment, picking at a bur stuck in the fibers of his cloak. “It is true, Yeshua, James, Peter, and I did ascend the mountain that night, but I fear we are not at liberty to discuss the details. Yeshua has asked us to remain silent for the time being.”

“Peter?” Todd said. “Who’s that? Is he someone you met up there?”

This broke the tension in the room as the six chuckled, throwing each other knowing glances.

“What’s so funny?” Todd asked.

“Of course,” James said. “You have not heard.”

“Heard what?” Alex asked.

“The Lord has renamed Simon,” James said. “He is now called Peter. It means ‘the rock.’”

“And not a moment too soon,” said Nathanael. “I could not keep the two Simons straight. Such common names are frustrating at times,” he said, eyeing John playfully.

“It is not just John. And James,” John said and returned Nathaniel’s grin. “There are too many of those as well.” John looked to Todd as if clarifying the statement. “The short man you may have seen with us. He is also called James.”

Todd wasn’t going to let the same name jokes break his resolve over the issue of the bright light. “Come, on. You guys can tell me. I promise, I won’t tell. What was with that light?”

Nobody spoke a word. Finally, James broke the uncomfortable silence. “Todd, it is not that we do not want to tell you. It is wonderful, really. It is just that Yeshua has

commanded us to say nothing about what we learned until . . .” He mulled over his choice of words.

“Until he is dead,” Phillip said.

“That is not going to happen!” Thomas yelled.

“Thomas, he said it would happen.” John said. “You were there.”

“He just wants to prepare us for the worst, that is all,” Thomas said. “He cannot know the future.”

“You may indeed be correct, Thomas,” Nathanael said. “If Yeshua had known you would not believe a word he said, you would still be hauling fish to Tiberius.”

Matthew leaned forward. “You are also forgetting that he said he would rise again on the third day.”

James shouted them all down. “You are also forgetting that he told us not to discuss this!”

“Actually,” Phillip said. “I believe he was referring to the fact that he was the—.”

“Phillip!” John shouted. “He told us not to tell!”

Phillip lowered his jaw in shame.

James sighed deeply and looked to Todd apologetically. “I do apologize, friend. I am afraid our discourse can seem angry at times.”

Alex placed a hand on Todd’s shoulder. “You do not look well, Todd. Was it the wine?”

No, it was not the wine. What Todd had just heard made the blood fall away from his face. “I just need some air, that’s all. If it’s alright, I’m going to take a break,” he said and thumbed toward the front door.

“Certainly,” Alex said. “Take all the time you need.” He looked across the table again and gracefully changed the subject. “So, Nathanael, how is the lamb?”

Todd went to the front door and stepped out into the smoky night air. He leaned against the wall next to a burning torch and sank to the ground as the heavy weight of cruel reality pressed on him.

Even atheists were familiar with the crucifix, the whole Good Friday, Easter thing. Jesus was going to suffer an excruciating death. Only these hapless apostles didn't know just how cruel that death would be. And just why had this not occurred to him before? Had he remembered this, he might have gone back home when Eleazar made the offer.

Dread fell hard upon him and he buried his face in his hands. “Eleazar, why did you leave me down here to witness this?” He looked up to the stars, his heart fluttering with anxiety.

*There is a reason . . . just believe,* Todd remembered Eleazar's last words. Could it be so Todd could see all that Jesus had done for him? Did a hard heart like Todd's need such a cruel lesson?

*There is a reason.*

A thought suddenly flashed in his head. Could it be? It was a long shot, but why else hadn't God plucked him out of those sandals and sent him home? Todd was a believer now. Wasn't that what Jake wanted? Or did God have a dual purpose for Todd's return. Was there a mission Todd had to fulfill first?

Then he thought of something else, something that made more sense than time travel, something even considered possible according by modern scientists. What if this

really was an alternate or parallel universe? Todd had suggested the possibility to Eleazar but never got a straight answer. It was almost as if Eleazar knew that Todd had hit on the truth. Eleazar would neither confirm nor deny it. If this was indeed an alternate universe, then anything was game. The future wouldn't be altered because in this reality, the future had not even happened yet.

Todd considered the possibilities. If Jesus survived to move his ministry down into Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or beyond, maybe those billion Muslims would be Christians. Maybe Todd could prevent centuries of war and hatred. In this universe, tragic events like 9-11 could be prevented.

His heart thudded harder. Who else among these mortal men knew the future? Then who else had the power to prevent the crucifixion, the most heinous act in history? Jesus had once said, 'he who is not with me is against me,' or something to that effect. Yes, Todd was for Jesus. And if that was true, then how could he possibly allow something as gruesome as a Roman crucifixion to happen to the kindest, most holy man to have ever walked the Earth? If Todd would do anything to save the life of Dillon, his own son, then he'd certainly go to any extreme to save the life of God's own Son. To do anything else was not only uncivilized, but it was unchristian. Yes, there was a reason. And if there was a reason, then there had to be a way.

One thing was certain, the crucifixion would happen in Jerusalem. He didn't have to be a Bible scholar to know that. The timing was obvious too. Everybody knew that Easter celebrated the resurrection of Christ. If he was resurrected, then he must have been killed. Therefore, the crucifixion wouldn't happen until spring. It was still summer now. He had until spring to figure out the how to save Jesus.

Todd prepared to go back inside. He paused at the front door, the burden of doubt weighing down on him. Did he really think he could pull off something like this? And should he really try? What if everything happened according to God's will? Eleazar had once said that nothing happened that God did not allow. If so, then Todd surely would not succeed and Jesus would suffer the same horrible fate. At best, the crucifixion would only be postponed. Then again, how could he just stand idly by and watch it happen without trying to stop it? If God judged a man by his heart, not necessarily by the outcome of actions, but rather than by the motive of those actions, then how would God judge him if he didn't at least try to save Jesus?

"I have to try," Todd said to himself. "I have no choice." He drew a long breath and pushed through the door.

## Chapter 21

It was autumn now. The inn was packed and Todd was right in the middle of the dinner rush. Pilgrims from up north were lodging on their journey south to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. Todd and Alex would take the last train out tomorrow, joining these pilgrims on their quest, locking up the inn behind them as they left.

Todd hurried into the kitchen to fetch more food for the hungry guests. Timothy sliced a loaf of bread. Priscilla stood in front of the charcoal brazier. She was in mid second trimester with a rounded bulge under her tunic. She glowed hormonally with unblemished olive skin. On the grill space next to a rack of expensive wheat fatted calf, she warmed lentil stew in a big pot. She ladled out stew into bowls as Elizabeth watched, standing on a stool so she could see over the table edge.

Todd started to move the bowls of stew and bread onto a platter. “Priscilla, I’ve got room for one more bowl. Two of the customers have money for the calf.”

Priscilla started to scoop stew from the pot, but paused midway and dropped the ladle back into the pot. Tears gathered in the corners of the fragile teen’s eyes and she brought her hands to her womb and rubbed her unborn fetus nervously.

Todd moved a respectful distance from Priscilla. He started to place a hand on her shoulder, but thought better of it. “Priscilla, is something wrong?”

Priscilla only turned her head to conceal the tears. She was shy. On any given day, Todd was lucky to get three words out of her. In this culture, married women didn’t chat with other single men. But something was wrong with Priscilla and Todd wasn’t leaving that kitchen without addressing the issue.

“Priscilla, please,” Todd said. “Talk to me. Is it your baby? Are you having pain? Have you had bleeding?” Todd looked to Timothy. His brows hiked up in concern, forming deep wrinkle trenches in his sun-baked forehead.

“Please forgive me,” she finally said. “I do not wish to trouble you. It is just . . .” She wiped her cheek with her sleeve.

“Tell me, Priscilla,” Todd said, appraising her rounded belly with concern. “Maybe I can help.”

“It is not for the child within me that I worry. It is Alexander. He speaks very highly of you. He thinks that you are brave and wise. But I am so afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

Timothy moved in next to Priscilla. “Todd, if you will allow me. Alexander sees you as a noble and wise physician from the North. He has great respect for you, despite the fact that you are a gentile.”

“I’m flattered,” Todd said. “I like the kid too. He’s got a lot of spunk for someone so short. So what’s this all about?”

Timothy returned to his knife and spoke as he sliced bread. “Alexander knows that you adhere to the peaceful teachings of Yeshua. Therefore, he restrains himself around you. Your seeming lack of malice toward the Romans has encouraged Alexander’s peaceful nature. However, Alexander is, how should I say it?” Timothy put the knife down and mulled his words. “He is very impressionable. He harbors great hatred for the Romans, just as every Jew does. Furthermore, I have witnessed him consorting with the zealots. It troubles me that Alexander is easily swayed by suggestion.” He paused and watched Elizabeth climb down from the stool and go to her mother, clinging to her leg out of concern. “Priscilla is afraid that Alexander will join the zealots in an uprising at Jerusalem. If this happens, Alexander will likely be killed. Or even worse, the Romans could make an example of him by crucifixion.”

Todd looked to Priscilla. She embraced Elizabeth and openly wept. This started Elizabeth crying too. Todd floundered for comforting words, but none came.

“Todd,” Timothy said. “Do you know what would happen to Priscilla and her children if Alexander were killed?”

“Uhhh, life insurance?”

Timothy hiked his brows even higher.

“It’s just something from my culture,” Todd said. “Never mind.”

“Unfortunately, in this culture, we have no such insurance. Priscilla’s father died last year. Moving home is no longer an option. Because women cannot own property, this inn would likely be auctioned. Her only options are to quickly find another husband or resort to prostitution.”

Pricilla wept even louder.

“What do you want me to do, Timothy?”

“Alexander reveres you as he would a wise older brother, or even a father. As I said before, he is easily influenced by suggestion. When you leave for Jerusalem tomorrow, all we ask is that you stay with Alexander at all times. Suggest that he ignore the teaching of the zealots and I think he will listen to you. Keep him safe, Todd. Please. Bring him home to his pregnant wife and daughter.”

Todd looked to Pricilla. They briefly made eye contact, before she turned away in shame. “Priscilla,” Todd said. “You have my word. I will take care of Alex. I will die myself before I let anything happen to him. I promise you that.”

Just then, Alex came through the door. “The guests are weak with hunger and their purses are full. How much longer?” Alex looked to Pricilla and he softened his tone. “Pricilla? Is everything alright?”

“She was just telling me how much she was going to miss you,” Todd said and handed Alex a pitcher of wine. He picked up the platter of soup and bread and carefully made his way toward the dining hall. “Come on, Alex. She’ll be okay. It’s just the pregnancy. It makes women emotional sometimes. My people call them hormones.”

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Todd stretched his walking staff before him as an incredibly lame shield. Stones pelted down from the angry Samaritan mob. Alex brandished his sword and made slicing motions at the crowd. A fist sized stone thudded against Alex's chest. He took the hint. Todd and he fled on foot with free hands overhead for helmets. Another stone stung Todd on the shoulder blade. They scurried behind the protection of an Ox cart loaded down with supplies. Todd went low and peeked between the oxen's beefy legs. Rocks no longer fell and the villagers stood by defensively. One by one, they returned to their routine and left Todd and Alex alone.

Todd examined a bruised, blood-streaked abrasion on his elbow. "That went well."

Alex laughed breathlessly and rubbed his stinging chest. "Maybe we should have better explained ourselves. Our message was to be considered *good* news." He chuckled again and sheathed his sword.

Todd frowned at Alex. "I'm glad you're enjoying this."

Eventually, the rest of the group joined up and they started south again. Todd and Alex brought up the rear of the caravan, dodging camel and donkey droppings, keeping a wary eye behind them. They'd been taken from behind by bandits before. They weren't going to let it happen again. Not only did Todd carry a good sturdy staff to help with the hills, but he carried a concealed sword as well. Maybe being armed wasn't the Christian thing to do, but even Peter carried a sword. Given the dangers on that lonely wilderness road, it was a necessary evil.

Making the journey even more precarious, instead of taking the normal route through Perea, Jesus had taken the caravan boldly over the shunned land of Samaria, among those Jewish outcasts that refused to worship God in Jerusalem but rather in their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Determined to share the gospel among these heathen, Jesus had sent out seventy disciples ahead of him to preach in the villages along the way. Todd and Alex had ventured along to the first village. They weren't exactly offered the key to the city. Word had it some of the apostles also ran into resistance. The Sons of Thunder were so mad at the Samaritans that they wanted to rain down fire from Heaven to consume the village. Naturally, Jesus would have none of that. He said just kick the dust off your feet and move on.

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Two days later the Jesus caravan moved slowly down the dirt road, inching over the hills toward Jerusalem. They headed into town for the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths. Alex had told Todd all about it ahead of time. It was the grandest and most festive of all Jewish celebrations. Small hut-like cubicles covered with tree branches littered the streets and rooftops of Jerusalem. People would come out of their houses and sleep in these "booths" as a way of remembering how their ancestors lived while they wandered the desert with Moses for forty years.

There were roughly a hundred pilgrims in the caravan, mostly men, with the few women and children that came along strategically placed on the inside for safety, flanked by men carrying heavy clubs and staffs. Among these women was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, manager of King Herod's household. She and a lady named Susanna helped foot

the bill for the journey. They were decked out with eye makeup, colorful garb, and jewelry, making a stark contrast as they rode atop donkeys that twitched their ears to shoo pestering flies. Another lady name Mary, from the town of Magdala, from whom Jesus had cast out several demons, road another donkey just behind Jesus and his apostles.

They had been on the road four days now, sleeping under tents on hard earth. On the way south they passed green pastures, tilled rolling fields with golden vineyards, dark cypress groves and honey-dripping date palms. Closer to Jerusalem, green earth surrendered to rocky, dusty, more sparsely vegetated hills, dotted with gnarled bark olive trees. Large leaf fig trees provided food and much welcomed shade. But fig trees alone could not sustain such a large group, as donkeys hauled wicker baskets and satchels packed with bread, parched grain, and dried fruit. Ox drawn carts carried heavy liquids like wine, beer, and water.

The caravan finally ground to a halt in a small village laid out on the slight slope of a hill. Todd scanned the stone houses and turned to Alex. “Somehow, this doesn’t do justice to your description of Jerusalem.”

Alex wiped sweat from his brow with the top of his hand. “No, Todd, this is a village known as Bethany. Jerusalem is on the other side of Mount Olive.”

“So is this where we’re camping for the night? Maybe we can get a room with a real mat to sleep on. My back doesn’t care much for Samaritan terrain.”

“Yes, I find the soil in Galilee to be much softer.” Alex rubbed his beard in thought. “As for why we stopped, I am not certain. Perhaps they intend to stay the night here and go into Jerusalem in the morning.”

Alex and Todd stood by, hoping word would filter down from the front of the caravan. About five minutes later, one of the apostles came to the rear of the caravan and riffled through a leather satchel attached to one of the donkeys.

“Come,” Alex said. “Let us ask.”

Todd followed Alex up to the apostle. He leaned against his staff as Alex did the talking.

“Pardon me,” Alex said. “Loudas, was it?”

Loudas glanced up from the satchel and then went back to searching. “I was certain we brought spices from Capernaum. Martha is already making a fuss over dinner.” Loudas glanced back up and eyed Alex’s leather satchel. “Is there a possibility you have a pinch of sorrel in that pouch? Martha is quite the perfectionist. Her bread dip is ruined without it, she tells us.”

“I am afraid I cannot help you,” Alex said. “Perhaps one of the neighbors has some.”

Loudas scanned the houses along the street. “Perhaps.” He angrily fastened the flap of the donkey’s satchel. “Must I always be the errand boy?”

Alex shifted feet uncomfortably. “My apologies, sir. I do not wish to keep you from your duties, however I was hoping you could tell me why we stopped. Do we plan to stay the night here?”

“Yeshua is staying in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha,” Loudas said. “However, theirs is a modest home and space is limited. Stay wherever you find a bed. Perhaps Simon the Leper has room on his floor.”

“My father lives in Jerusalem,” Alex said. “We shall board with him during the feast.”

“Very well, then.” Loudas said. “Yeshua will surely be teaching in the Temple courts. You will find us there.” Loudas eyes snapped to Todd’s waist. He eyed the suspicious sword shaped bulge under his tunic.

Todd self-consciously moved his hand to shield his sword from view. He hated carrying that thing, but Alex had insisted.

“How is your skill with that sword?” Loudas asked. A sly grin formed on his lips.

Todd hesitated, not sure how to respond. “I guess I can hold my own.”

“You are from Gaul, so I have heard. Those Romans,” Loudas said, gesturing toward Jerusalem. “Their conquest of your land was particularly brutal. When the daughter and mother of Caesar died, I understand he eased his grief by shedding the blood of Gauls. He had some of your leaders flogged until dead. I assume they captured you. Is this not how you came to be a servant of Eleazar?”

“I’d rather not discuss it,” Todd said. “You know, painful memories.”

“Boorish details of your captivity do not matter,” Loudas said. “You are clearly now one of our fold. When Messiah rains his fire from Heaven, we will need some good men to keep order until a new government is established. You are a man of great stature, nearly three and a half cubits in height. Your size will compensate for any skills you lack with the sword.” Loudas shifted his attention to Alex. “And you, Alexander? Your inn is prosperous. How much have you paid in Roman taxes this year? I imagine you know how to use that sword,” he said and pointed to the bulge under Alex’s cloak.

Loudas took Todd and Alex by the neck and drew them near to him. “When the time is right, you will know. Messiah needs only a few good men in place.” Loudas squeezed Todd’s neck and backed away. “And you two are good men. I can see that.”

“Thank you,” Todd said and tugged on Alex’s tunic. “We’ll keep that in mind. I think we should go now. We’ve still got a lot of walking to do.”

“My servant is right,” Alex said. “We should be going. However, I will certainly discuss this with you later. I want to hear more.”

Todd cleared his throat. “It’s getting late, Alex. Your mother is probably worried sick.”

Alex led the way up the street, away from the Jesus caravan. Alex seemed preoccupied, the wheels in his head turning as he mulled the words of Loudas. Maybe Priscilla wasn’t just hormonal. Alex would have to be watched. If he wasn’t interested in the zealots, the zealots were certainly interested in him.

“When the time is right, you will know it!” Loudas called after them. “Everybody will know!”

“Thank you,” Todd yelled back and hastened his pace.

## Chapter 22

Todd's legs quivered with fatigue. Slowly they both ascended the ridge, where thickets of olive trees, as well as a few fig, almond, and pomegranate trees thrived on the rocky slope of the hill. Instead of following the easy road into town, Alex had insisted that they hike to the top of Mount Olive. That way they could get the full spectacular view of Jerusalem.

Todd stabbed his staff into the earth and pulled down on it with each lumbering step. "This better be good," Todd said.

Alex extended his hand. "Let me help you."

"I'm too proud and arrogant to take your hand. Thanks anyway."

Alex laughed. “You are a stubborn man, Todd of Livingston.” Alex pointed up ahead. “Look, we have almost reached the crest of Mount Olive. From here it is all downhill.”

Todd was too winded to respond.

Finally, they topped the summit. Todd steadied himself against his staff and took in the scene. At the foot of Mount Olive, a stone bridge with curved support arches stretched over a rocky valley. It led to an enormous rectangular compound enclosed by a portico with hundreds of white pillars supporting the roof. In the center was another smaller, ornate, walled complex that was sectioned into halves. Towering over the entire structure was a monolithic white edifice with gold trim on the outer edges and a massive set of golden front doors.

In the city beyond, thousands of pilgrims and pack animals teamed along the busy streets. Elaborate clusters of Roman style buildings with red tiled roofs were garnished with flower gardens and trees. Elsewhere, smaller cube-shaped buildings were crammed together. Completely enclosing the entire hilltop metropolis, massive terracotta stone walls studded with soaring guard towers zigzagged over the rough terrain.

“Impressive, Alex. So what’s that huge compound below us?”

“Ah, yes. That is the famed Herod’s Temple. I have spoken of it often. It is what my father works to complete. Look there, to the southeast of the city,” Alex said, pointing up and away. “That is the palace where Herod himself resides. To the left, that large building with the courtyard in the center, that is the palace of the high priest.” Alex then pointed to the center of the city. “That is the headquarters of the Sanhedrin. And there,

sloping away from the great temple of the Jews is the City of David. It was named for the great king that founded Jerusalem many years ago.”

“This view is almost worth the workout,” Todd said.

“Then let us go for a closer look,” Alex said. “I am famished. We will take this path down into the Kidron Valley and enter by the Lion’s gate. My father’s house is only a short distance from there. It is next to the Roman Hippodrome, just up from the Pool of Bethesda.”

Todd followed Alex down the dirt path that wove itself in between thickets of olive trees. When they emerged from the canopy of trees, they fell in behind a team of oxen that hauled slabs of limestone toward the bridge. Ahead, dozens of pilgrims prodded goats, sheep, cows, and other livestock to the Temple for slaughter, sacrificed to God to atone for the sins of man. It was a barbaric tradition, but Todd understood the reason behind it. Sincerity of repentance was proved by the willingness to give up a prized possession to atone for one’s disobedience. The healthier the animal, the more you showed your sincerity. And the reason a living animal had to die was simple. The wages of sin is death. Unfortunately, for these poor hapless beasts, it is they that must take the wrap instead of the sinner.

As Todd approached the bend of the Kidron Valley, he froze as his eyes locked onto movement just outside of the city walls.

“Are you feeling well,” Alex asked. “Was the climb too much for you?”

Todd pointed ahead. Vultures dropped and ascended as they competed over their meal. “Please tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

Alex kicked the dirt in anger. “Why must they ruin every festival with such brutality?” Moisture built in Alex’s eyes and his lip quivered with rage. His grip fell tightly onto the sword under his tunic. “Messiah will free us of this tyranny. Why does he tarry, Todd? Why?”

“I can’t answer that, Alex.”

“We do not have to see this. They want us to see this so we will fear them. We do not have to give them the satisfaction.” Alex pointed to the arched bridge. “We can enter through the temple complex. It will add more steps to our journey, but I will take you that way if you prefer.”

Todd drew a long determined breath. “If this is the fastest way, this is the way I’m going. My feet are killing me.”

“Very well,” Alex said and started back up the path. “Avert your eyes to the path. Do not look at them. That is what they want.”

Todd followed cautiously and kept his eyes on the road just like Alex had suggested. But as he approached, the scene mercilessly expanded into his peripheral vision. He squinted to narrow his field of vision. He immediately felt shame. What was wrong with him, anyway? A year ago, he would have craned his neck to see such a morbid spectacle. What had transformed that morbid curiosity into revulsion? He didn’t have to think hard for the answer. It was because before him was the very fate that Jesus would suffer if Todd did not somehow stop it. Those agonized, tortured souls up on those crosses only hammered into him the urgency of his mission, just as those heartless, brutal soldiers hammered the nails into the victim’s wrist.

Was this what Christianity had made him? A coward?

Todd hesitantly glanced up just as the groans reached his ears.

Several women wailed below four crosses held together by crossbeams. It resembled a large rail fence. This fence lined the road up to Jerusalem, forcing a startlingly clear view of the atrocity. In a wooden cart off to the side, two men lay dead and naked in bloody heaps. Three Roman soldiers leaned against the cart with arms folded over their chest armor as they enjoyed the scene.

Two men were pinned to the wooden apparatus with fat metal nails. One nail forged a bloody hole through both feet, which were smashed one atop the other, splitting the metatarsal bones wide, ripping cartilage, muscle, vein, and nerves. Two other nails stretched the arms tight, leaving just enough slack to allow the men to sag forward. The nails pierced the wrist, mashing down hard on the median nerve. This involuntarily forced the thumbs down in line with the fingers.

The first man was quite dead. Caked in dried blood and vomit, with no rope to support his waste, he drooped forward forming an arch with his back. A scaly-headed vulture plucked at a bloody red hole that was his eye socket.

A wave of nausea washed over Todd. He cupped his mouth and steadied himself on Alex's shoulder.

“Try not to look at them,” Alex said. “We will be past them in a moment.”

But Todd needed to see this. Last year, he'd attended a presentation given by a physician that outlined the effects Jesus had suffered and the physical ramifications on his body. Jesus' torture would begin well before he hung on the cross. He would be beaten by fists, spit upon, thorns driven into his head, and a good portion of his back

would be ripped away by the cruel Roman flagrum. Todd needed to see this. It would instill in him the urgency of saving Jesus from an even worse, more torturous fate.

An agonizing moan rose sharply to a high-pitched wale. Todd reluctantly focused on the other man on the cross. He was just a kid, no more than twenty years old. His gaunt, naked body clung to rough, splintered timbers. He was slick with shiny sweat. Blood dripped from the end of his big toe and splattered onto the rocks and dirt below. His eyes were wide with terror. He writhed in agony. He surged his torso, desperately sucking at oxygen. He spasmodically thrust himself upward and shoved his full weight onto the stake that forged a bloody hole in the nerve-laden center of his feet.

Todd could not begin to imagine the excruciating torment the young man suffered. Yet, the physician in Todd knew well what he was trying to do. When he hung down from his arms, his chest muscles, along with the intercostals between his ribs, could not contract. He managed to inhale, but his stretched muscles would not let him exhale. For that, he had to thrust himself upward. Eventually, after hours of intermittent partial asphyxiation, his muscles would weaken and fail. His cramps would be so severe his ability to lunge upward for air would diminish. Gradually, the sac around his heart would fill with serum and painfully compress his heart. This, along with increasingly shallow breaths, would little by little sap the life away until he mercifully drew his last breath.

It was hard to imagine a more painful, gruesome death. Yet history was clear. Jesus was to suffer a still more agonizing death—unless Todd figured out how to stop it.

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Trumpets blared their wakeup call from the temple grounds, rudely rousing Todd to his third day in Jerusalem. Loudas was wrong. Jesus had not as of yet showed at the Temple. Rumor had it he would be there today. Still, the last two days had not been a total bore. Alex's parents were lively, gracious hosts, eager to make the savior of their granddaughter comfortable, despite the fact that he was a gentile. Simon, Alex's father, told scores of humorous antic dotes about his adventures in the stonemason business. And from his broad, beefy shoulders, he seemed well suited for hauling stone, although he mostly just gave orders now. He stood a good twelve inches taller than his petite wife did. Now Todd knew why Alex turned out so short.

On the first day in Jerusalem, Todd entertained himself by watching Alex haggle with vendors as they shopped for goods not available in Capernaum. Jerusalem had it all. Galileans sold fish from booths, fresh and salted, and the farmers of Sharon offered fresh vegetables. Spice grinders, weavers, earthenware makers, oil pressers, cloth dyers, saddle makers, tent makers, and perfume sellers pushed their goods on naïve foreigners, eagerly vying for whatever change was left over after being fleeced by tax collectors. And on every corner, a scribe sat behind a wooden table with a goose quill behind his ear, pitching his services and selling tiny parchment scrolls with sacred writing.

The second day was for sightseeing. They had walked the entire city on white paver stone, down wide avenues in the Upper City and then in the Lower City, where streets were so narrow that two people could barely pass each other. In the Upper City High Priests, aristocracy, and tax farmers shamelessly flaunted their swollen opulence. They lived in elaborately carved marble homes surrounded by almond groves and rose

gardens. For wealthy Romans, arched columns supported aqueducts that carried water to villas nestled in the midst of hedges trimmed to the shape of mythic figures.

In the Lower City, grinding, stinking poverty and decay were the norm as peasants wandered the filthy tangle of streets. Even worse, just outside the Dung Gate was the Valley of Hinnom, a vile and hellish place where the lepers and beggars made their camp and dug through garbage heaps for scraps of maggot infested sacrificial remains. Fires burned constantly, gnawing away at the ever-replenished pile of refuse. The smoke was a welcomed mask from the rotting smell of disease and death. Yet just up the steep, rocky ravine, the massive city walls shielded Jerusalem from the horror of Hinnom as the city pulsed with vibrant celebration—and total indifference.

By midmorning of the third day, Todd followed Alex as he wove his way toward the Temple through the congested narrow streets, dodging locals as well as foreigners in their colorful native costumes. The air was filled with the steady clamor of the crowd, the coaxing of the hucksters, and the bawling and blatting of camels and donkeys. Celebratory shacks made of tree branches and palm leaf roofs were everywhere—on top of houses, in courtyards, in open squares, and they also stuck out into the street from the sides of homes, further congesting the streets. People actually slept in these things, the way Todd slept in backyard tents as a child, to commemorate the forty years of desert wandering with Moses.

Todd moved steadily toward the Temple Mount, cautiously eyeing the towering castle Antonia, the home of cruel Roman soldiers who'd just as soon impale a Jew as look at them. Like an ugly wart on a beautiful woman's face, the fortress stood at the northwest corner of the temple complex. Four guard towers stood at the four corners of

the stone eyesore, with one of the towers jutting into the complex itself to assure a commanding view of the temple grounds just in case trouble erupted below. Soldiers paced to the top of the walls, keeping a vigilant eye.

Todd and Alex moved along a walkway that hugged the massive outer wall of the temple complex. They reached the southwest corner of the mount, cut left, and followed stairs toward a set of double entrances called the Hulda Gates. Filthy beggars dressed in rags clogged the way pleading with grimy outstretched hands and their best pity-evoking frowns. They joined a steady stream of worshipers through one of the gates that passed directly under the long administrative wing of the temple complex. Inside, they inched along in the crowd, hindered by awestruck tourist who moved slowly as they gazed upward at a series of ornate round-domed chambers decked out with colorful, intricate floral patterns with shapes of vines and grape clusters. Finally, they made their way to stairs and climbed to an opening in the plaza floor.

Inside the temple grounds, merchant booths lined the outer walls, erected haphazardly in between thick stone pillars that supported the portico ceiling. Pilgrims milled about on mosaic floors, haggling over the price of sacrificial lambs and doves, while others griped about the exchange rate for foreign currency. In order to make an offering or buy a sacrificial animal, first the Roman denarii and other foreign currency had to be exchanged for Jewish shekels that had no portraits stamped onto them. Otherwise, they would violate the Jewish prohibition against graven images.

Far across the temple grounds, steps rose to Roman style walls three stories high, cordoning off the inner courts of the Temple. From within these walls, smoke billowed to the sky as priests slaughtered and burned sacrificial animals as a token of repentance.

Overshadowing everything was the towering T-shaped heart of the Temple complex, crafted out of white marbles and trimmed with gold.

“Perhaps he has gone to the Court of Women to preach,” Alex said.

They walked across the temple grounds and came to a chest high wall with a wide gap left open for pedestrian traffic. Beyond this wall, worshipers who had completed their ceremonial washing stood facing the center of the temple with eyes closed, palms turned to heaven, mumbling in prayer. Others sat on the floor and rocked back and forth.

Two spear holding Temple guards dressed in maroon with spiked helmets stood inside the wall opening. A sign on the wall read, ‘No gentile may enter, on pain of death.’

Alex caught Todd by the arm. “It is safer if you do not pass beyond this wall. You should stay in the Court of Gentiles.”

Being the object of discrimination still ticked Todd off. “So I’m a Jew then,” he said. “I’ve got the circumcision to prove it. You’ve got Jews here from all over the empire, in all shades and colors. How could they prove I’m not a Jew?”

Alex gave a sigh of resignation. He’d known Todd long enough to know arguing was a futile waste of effort. “Very well, Todd, but I will not take you beyond the gates of the Court of Women. I already have the blood of Eleazar on my hands.”

A man yelled as he dashed by. “The healer from Galilee is in the Portico of Solomon!”

“We should go,” Alex said, “before the crowd is too large.”

They jogged toward the commotion. On the way they dodged stone shards haphazardly scattered along the foot of the chest high wall, litter left over from stonemasons who worked to expand the wall. They paused behind a crowd that had

gathered in front of the colonnade. A lone figure robed in white stood on a raised platform and waved his arms dramatically as he spoke. Mount Olive loomed from behind.

The apostles stood scattered randomly around Jesus. Todd and Alex pushed into the crowd and joined them. Peter was to Jesus' right, John stood off to the left, and a few feet away the zealot called Loudas leaned against one of the massive portico support columns.

"Who taught you these things?" a Pharisee shouted from the front of the crowd.

"My teaching is not my own," Jesus said, his voice echoing against the stone portico walls. "It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him. Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?"

Todd's fist tightened around his staff. Paranoia dropped his other hand to his sword. It wasn't spring yet, but who knew what could happen in an alternate universe?

"You are demon-possessed!" someone shouted. "Who is trying to kill you?"

Jesus' face tightened with resolve. "I did one miracle, and you are all astonished. Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision, you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the Law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

A man from the crowd came up to Loudas and shoved an accusing finger in his face. “You there, what do you know of this man? Is this not the man they are trying to kill? Yet, here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Christ?”

Loudas made menacing slits out of his eyelids. “I assure you, sir, he is the Christ.”

Unconvinced, the man shook his head in disbelief. “That is what *you* say. But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from.”

As the man said this, Jesus looked straight at him. He pursed his lips and looked back into the crowd. “Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from,” he shouted. “I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.”

An old Pharisee pushed his way to the front and slung his accusing finger at Jesus. “Seize him!”

The crowd surged forward and Todd came alive. A man charged with a drawn sword. Todd swung his staff overhead and came down on the man’s wrist. The man dropped the blade and squealed like a child. Todd ducked low as a stone flew past his head. The angry crowd surged closer to Jesus in a clamor of angry shouts.

Alex brandished his sword. “Stay back! Stay back or suffer the sting of my blade!”

Todd cocked his staff over his shoulder and made lunging movements, jabbing at the rowdy crowd so they’d know he meant business. A violent blow to the face knocked him back. He dropped his staff and brought his hands to his face. Another blow struck his

forearm. A foot to the gut sent him to his knees. He curled in a fetal position and gasped for air. Just then, men in maroon cloaks and spiked helmets stepped between him and the crowd—the Temple guards. Alex’s hands cuffed Todd under his shoulders and heaved him backward, out of reach of the angry mob.

“Can you walk, Todd?”

Todd saw the bleeding gash over Alex’s eye first, and then the whole face came to focus.

“Todd, I said can you walk?”

“I think so,” he said in a groan, reeling from the kick to his diaphragm.

“Take my hand!”

Todd gripped Alex’s hand just as another pair of hands helped him up from behind. It was Loudas. They each took an arm and helped Todd toward the exit.

“Do not worry, brothers,” Loudas said between heavy breaths. “Yeshua escaped unscathed. They are testing his patience now! When they push too hard, look to the sky, my brothers. Then you will know the time is at hand!”

They stopped at the exit doors from the Court of Gentiles. Loudas held out Todd’s staff. “I believe you dropped this.”

Todd took the staff and leaned into it. “I’m good now, Loudas. Thanks.”

Of course, Alex wasted no time. He reached out and embraced Loudas. “Thank you, brother Loudas. I will take him home to my father’s house. We will be safe there.”

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Later that week, deep abrasions marked Todd’s bruised and swollen cheek. His abdomen was still sore to the touch. He and Alex watched a procession under the shade of the

Portico of Solomon, directly across from the massive doors of the Beautiful gate that opened into the Court of Women. It was the same spot of the injurious riot earlier that week.

Pilgrims in festive attire waved willow and myrtle branches in one hand and held up a lemon like fruit in the other. At the head of the procession, a trumpeter's blast resounded jubilantly as he followed close behind an elaborately costumed temple priest carrying a golden pitcher. It was part of a ceremony involving a trek to the Pool of Siloam to fill the golden pitcher with its water.

It was the last and biggest day of the feast of Tabernacles and the crowd was wasted with wine. Drunken people do crazy things. How much more would the Pharisees take from Jesus? They would seize him now, if not for a great many people like Todd and Alex. An arrest now would risk all out civil war.

Suddenly, Jesus took the preacher's platform. A crowd immediately gathered around him. Todd gripped his staff with both hands. Butterflies fluttered in his still tender gut. If he had any common sense left in him, he'd run off like a coward. But what choice did he have? God was watching and judging his every move. Besides, he was working security for the very Son of the Creator of the universe. If that didn't win bragging rights in Heaven, then nothing would.

Jesus pointed at the golden pitcher carried by the priest. "If anyone is thirsty!" His rich, commanding voice swept over his audience. He paused and waited for the clamor of random voices to settle. "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink! Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

The priest angrily thrust the golden pitcher high above his head and hurried toward the exit. Todd moved into the crowd, sniffing out hints of trouble. But they seemed less volatile today, yet still very much divided about the identity of Jesus.

“Surely this man is a prophet,” someone said.

Still others said, “He is the Christ!”

But others asked, “How can the Christ come from Galilee? The scriptures say the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived.”

Todd let his guard down a notch. At least it was a civil argument.

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The Feast of Tabernacles came and went. After the Sabbath, the booths that cluttered the streets and housetops were taken down and the pilgrims who’d flocked to Jerusalem for the festival went back to their homes. Jesus stayed in town so Todd and Alex decided to hang out for a couple more days. A native of Capernaum had taken the message back to Priscilla.

They were back in the Temple courts, this time in a different section of the Court of Gentiles that was still under construction. Jesus and his apostles sat around on stone slabs that were being used to expand the wall that kept gentiles clear of the inner courts. Alex’s father argued with another stonemason, something about having cut a stone too short.

Taking a break between sermons, Jesus doodled on an exposed patch of dirt. A pack of Pharisees stood off to the side arguing with each other because Jesus had just ticked them off again. They’d brought a woman caught in adultery and asked Jesus

whether or not she should be stoned to death. But Jesus infuriated them with his clever reply. Jesus basically told these self-righteous holy-rollers that they were sinners themselves, no better than the woman they'd like to see dead. He'd told them, 'if any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' That shut them up and they let the woman go.

Jesus stood and rallied the other apostles. After a few words, they headed for the massive, ornate doors of the Beautiful Gate, which led into the Court of Women.

Todd and Alex pursued Jesus toward the entrance to the Court of Women.

Alex stopped in front of the flight of stairs that lead to the massive doors.

"Remember, Todd, we agreed that you would go no further than here. It is not worth risking your life. I beg you, wait for me out here."

Todd started to protest. One glance at the mean faced Temple guard convinced him Alex was right. Human life meant nothing to these people, least of all, gentile life. "Fine, but if you need me, I'll be right here."

Alex went into the Court of Women. Todd followed up the stairs, but stopped just in front of the doors. Through the open doorway, he could already see Jesus taking the stage, quickly drawing the attention of those milling about. It was just close enough for Todd to hear, so long as they didn't close the door.

Jesus spread his arms wide and turned his palms toward heaven. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

An angry Pharisee pushed his way to the front. "Here you are, appearing as your *own* witness. Your testimony is not valid!"

“Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards, whereas I pass judgment on no one.” Jesus looked out into the crowd to make certain he had everybody’s attention. “But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me.” He turned back to the Pharisee and pointed at him accusingly. “In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for myself, whereas my other witness is the Father who sent me.”

Two more Pharisees stepped closer. “Where is your father?”

Jesus’ voice was suddenly drowned out by the sound of straining metal and wood as the huge doors swung shut, closed by two spiteful Temple guards.

“Thanks,” Todd said. “Appreciate that. Where I come from that’s called discrimination.”

Todd went back down the stairs and sat on the last step. He would just have to wait it out.

A few minutes later, the heavy door screeched open. A clamor of angry shouts came from within. A man stumbled out. He tore his cloak apart at the chest and wailed loudly in mock agony. “Blasphemy!” he cried. “Blasphemy!”

Behind him, an angry mob spilled through the doorway. “He is possessed by a demon! Stone him!” They all rushed down the stairs to the construction site. They gathered up stone shards and hurried back toward the Court of Women.

Todd locked his fists onto his staff and braced himself for battle. “Alex! I could use some help here!” He brought his staff up parallel to the ground and surged forward,

catching two men in the hip. They quickly recovered and kept toward the Temple. He brought his staff down and at the shin of a dark hooded Pharisee. The old man tumbled forward and stones toppled from his hands. Todd grabbed at him and snatched away his dark hood, sending gray, disheveled hair down over his face.

The Pharisee swept the hair from his eyes. “That man is possessed! We must stone him!”

“He is not possessed, you crazy old fool!”

“He claims to be God Himself! He says I AM! *Blasphemy!* For that he must die!”

“Haven’t you seen his miracles? What if he’s telling the truth?”

“Those miracles are from Beelzebub!”

Panic stabbed Todd when he saw the rock-wielding mob rush past the heavy doors and into the Court of Women.

Todd knocked the Pharisee to the ground and tore into a sprint. He rushed up the stairs. As he reached the top step, his foot caught and sent him skidding across the floor. His elbows ground into the rough stone and his staff skittered out in front of him. He reached out for his staff. The heavy foot of a Temple guard stomped down on his wrist. Todd looked up to see the guard raising his spear, poised to strike.

## Chapter 23

Alex rushed from the Court of Women and shoved the guard, sending him tumbling down the stairs.

“Quickly!” Alex shouted and helped Todd to his feet.

Midway down the stairs, the stunned guard limped back up the steps with his sword drawn, blood dripping from his knee.

Two more Temple guards rushed up the stairs.

Todd snatched up his staff. “Alex! Where is Yeshua?”

“I do not know! It was chaos. I think he got away, but I cannot be certain.”

“One way to find out,” Todd said and charged into the Court of Women.

“I do not see him,” Alex said as his eyes darted around the riotous crowd.

The mob surged toward a side exit. Todd and Alex merged into the angry mob and followed it into the streets of Jerusalem.

There was no sign of Jesus.

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Priscilla cried out as her uterus painfully contracted. Todd and Alex sat in the next room and warmed themselves by the fire, burning sticks and thorn bushes in an open hearth. Smoke blackened the ceiling and found its way outside through a window high on the wall. Dr. Todd Heller should have been delivering Alex's child. Unfortunately, Todd was a man. That kind of thing just wasn't done. A midwife was hired instead.

Alex tossed more twigs into the fire and rubbed his hands together nervously.

"She'll be fine," Todd said and handed Alex a cup of wine. "If you don't relax, you're going to have a stroke."

Autumn had given way to cold, damp winter. It had been about two months now since the near stoning of Jesus. Apparently, he had slipped out a side entrance to the Court of Women and left the angry mob with no one to kill. Soon afterward, he had slipped out of Jerusalem altogether. But not before restoring a blind man's sight the following Sabbath, further agitating the Pharisees. The Sadducees weren't happy about it either.

Who knew what kind of ruckus Jesus was causing now? In Jerusalem, it was the tail end of the Feast of Dedication—an eight-day festival commemorating the great Jewish victory over the Syrians by the forces of Judas Maccabeus and the rededication of the desecrated Temple. In the States, it's called Hanukkah.

Alex stared into the fire wistfully. “I know we should be there. I simply could not leave Priscilla at a time such as this. Yeshua himself would not approve of such an action.”

“You did the right thing,” Todd said. “Right now your duty is to your wife and family.”

“Still, if what Loudas says is true, we could be missing out on something amazing. Imagine, fire raining down from Heaven! It would be just like when Moses held up his staff. His people easily massacred the pagan armies of the Promised Land. God’s hand will certainly be behind us as well. The Romans will be crushed like grapes for wine.” He swirled the wine in his cup for effect.

“Alex, I know Rome oppresses your people, but I just can’t see that happening.”

“Do you doubt Yeshua to be the Messiah foretold by the prophets? Who else could have such power?”

“I don’t doubt Yeshua was sent from God. I’m just not sure he’s that kind of Messiah.”

“What other kind of Messiah is there? All of our troubles are because of Rome. Their pagan gods and rituals defile the very land God promised to his people. Do you not want to be a part of God’s army, Todd? Do you not want to help defeat Rome? There is no greater honor.”

Todd leaned forward and put his hands closer to the warmth of the flame, carefully calculating his argument. Priscilla and Timothy knew Alex well. He wasn’t yet a zealot, but clearly had that potential, especially if he hung around the likes of Loudas long enough. He had to head Alex off before he got into trouble. Priscilla was depending

on him. “Look, Alex, you’ve heard Yeshua speak. He preaches love, not war. His parables allude to something greater than this world. You have to think bigger than Rome. Think about eternity. Yeshua is trying to save us from our sins. He wants to get us into Heaven, where things are permanent.” Todd sighed and popped his knuckles. “I don’t know, Alex, I just get the feeling he couldn’t care less about Rome. He’s got a bigger agenda.”

Alex mulled over his thoughts. Another wail from Priscilla startled his focus to the other room. Then he slowly turned his attention back to Todd. “I have noticed what you are saying. What we want from Yeshua and what Yeshua preaches seem to contradict. But what of Loudas? He is one of Yeshua’s inner twelve. How can one of the apostles be so misled?”

“I don’t know, Alex. I’ve been trying to figure that guy out myself. I’m not too sure he has a true grasp on reality. And he’s up to something, I can feel it.”

Just then, the door burst open and the midwife stepped out. “Alexander! You have a son!”

Todd slapped Alex on the back. “Congratulations! Now you have another reason to live. Forget about Rome for now. Go in there, kiss your wife, and hold your son.”

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Pudgy baby Nicholas squirmed naked atop a blanket while an unusually warm December sun shined down on his yellowish skin. Two fires crackled a few feet away on both sides of the infant to help stave off the cold. Alex’s child was jaundiced. If the bilirubin stayed

high too long, kernicterus could develop. The result would be irreversible brain damage. Fortunately, bilirubin was easily broken down by sunlight. Just a few minutes a day should do the trick.

“Are you certain he will not become ill from the cold?” Alex asked.

“His baby fat should insulate him,” Todd said. “Baby fat is different, denser than an adult’s. It keeps them warmer. Besides, he has the fire and warm sun. Trust me, we Gallic physicians have advanced knowledge of the medical arts.”

“Forgive me, brother. It is only the father in me that worries.”

“I don’t blame you,” Todd said, glancing around at the odd stares of passersby.

Just then, a man crouched down to one of the fires and warmed his hands. It was Loudas, apparently just arriving back to Capernaum from Jerusalem. “I must ask, what strange rituals do you subject this unfortunate child to?”

“You see how yellow he is?” Todd said. “We call it bilirubin where I come from. It can cause harm if allowed to remain. The sun helps to remove it.”

“I understand,” Loudas said with a skeptical smirk. “Now I also understand why you and Alex were not in Jerusalem for the Festival of Lights.”

“I could not leave my wife at such a time,” Alex said. “I believe Rabbi Yeshua would support my decision. But please, tell us what happened. Was there trouble?”

“Indeed there was. Again, they picked up stones against us. However, they hurled not one. I tell you it was as if their hands were frozen by the very hand of God. When the time is right, his hand will do far more than that. I trust you will be in Jerusalem for Passover? Half of Israel will be there—easily enough men to chase the Romans into the sea. It sounds as if that might be the right time. Do you not agree, Alex?”

“We shall certainly be there,” Alex said with a menacing tone. “I have been waiting for that moment all my life.”

Todd moved between Loudas and Alex. “I don’t want to be rude, but Nicholas has had enough. We should get him inside now.” He handed Alex a blanket. “Alex, would you please?”

“I was going to suggest that myself,” Loudas said, oddly eyeing the naked infant. “That is strange medicine, Todd of Livingston. But I trust you are well versed in your craft. And Alex, the Lord has blessed you with a fine son. I sense that Israel will hold great promise for the child.”

Todd made a sarcastic smirk. “Thank you, Loudas. We both look forward to that.”

Without another word, Loudas walked off toward the Galilee.

Alex scooped up Nicholas and wrapped him in the blanket. “Why are you so rude to Loudas? He only wants what every other Jew wants. Have you even considered that he is right?”

“Loudas hates Rome more than he loves Yeshua—that’s why I’m rude to him. Yeshua says to love your enemy, not kill them. And you know as well as I do that Yeshua has never even once hinted that we take up arms against the Romans.”

“Of course he has not. If so, the Romans would surely have him arrested for sedition. Yeshua is much too clever.”

“Look, I can’t explain how I know. Call it intuition if you want. But I’m telling you Loudas is wrong. Yeshua is not that kind of Messiah. He wants to save your soul, not your national pride.”

“I agree with you, Todd. Yeshua does preach a gospel of eternal salvation. But what if Loudas is also right? Why is it that Yeshua cannot be both kinds of Messiah? Do you limit God that much? He can save our souls *and* free us from Rome. Consider my words, Todd. Yeshua is the perfect commander for an army. If the soldiers are hungry, he can feed them, just as he fed thousands of men in the hills of Galilee. If the men fall injured, Yeshua can heal them. If they die, Yeshua can raise them back to life. How could we lose?”

“Violence is not the answer. You have a handsome young son there, Alex. It would be a shame for your wife to raise Nicholas alone.”

“Todd, you have been very secretive about your past and I have respected your privacy. You saved my daughter from certain death. I am indebted to you. But I must ask you. Were you not captured by Rome? Did you not witness the treachery of Caesar? Did they not slaughter your people by the thousands? You do not act like a man who has been captured and taken from everything he loves.”

“Oh, Alex, you have no idea what I left for this place. But my former life would have faded into dust regardless of the Romans. What I found here is permanent.”

Alex brought Nicholas to his shoulder and stalked away toward the inn. “The quest linens and chamber pots need to be changed,” he called back to Todd. “Do not forget who pays your salary!”

## Chapter 24

Alex stalled at the front door of the inn. He brought baby Nicholas down and cradled him, gazing into the infants face for a long thoughtful moment. He turned back to Todd. “Please forgive my outburst. I sometimes forget that, if not for you, my other child would not be with me.”

Todd kicked dirt into one of the fires to extinguish it. “And now it’s that child’s father I’m trying to protect.”

“I realize that, Todd. Your concern is endearing. But sometimes there are more important things than a man’s safety. A man must do what he is called to do.”

“You’re right, Alex. But first you need to be very sure of what you’re called to do.”

“I believe we are all called to function in different capacities,” Alex said. “Your calling is most certainly different than that which the Lord has called me to do in his service. I think that you should follow your direction in serving the Lord and I will follow mine.”

“All I ask is that you think long and hard about what you plan to do. Don’t let your hatred get the best of you.”

“You may indeed be correct, Todd of Livingston. Perhaps we should simply wait and see how events unfold over the coming months.”

“Fair enough, Alex. Until then we’ll just agree to disagree.”

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It was spring again, time for the festival of Passover. Alex had closed the inn and they were headed south without the protection of the Jesus caravan. For safety reasons, they went around Samaria and came up by the main road through Jericho—a balmy desert oasis about a day’s walk east of Jerusalem. The walled city’s fertile ground thrived with tropical produce and palm groves. Unfortunately, there was yet another Roman tax collection station, siphoning even more treasure from the traveling Jew’s purse, further adding to Todd’s understanding for Jewish resentment. Fortunately, this same rich tax collector, a short fellow named Zacchaeus, had a change of heart after an earlier encounter with Jesus. Since the Sabbath began at sundown, he kindly gave Todd and Alex a free meal and bed for the next two nights. Zacchaeus also filled them in on Jesus’

latest miracles—the healing of ten lepers and taking a guy who’d been dead four days and bringing him back to life.

On the morning after the Sabbath, Todd and Alex left Jericho. By mid-afternoon, they made it to the outskirts of Jerusalem. They had heard rumors that Jesus and his entourage were up ahead in the village of Bethphage, perched on a rocky plateau near Mount Olive. Jesus had been oddly elusive over the winter. They certainly didn’t want to lose him again on the streets of Jerusalem.

“There they are,” Alex said and hastened his pace. “They are just topping the hill toward Jerusalem.”

They rounded the hill at Bethphage and slowed down when they caught up with the Jesus party. And a party it was. People cheered and danced up and down the dirt street. The sound of lively drums and flutes mixed with excited voices. They waved palm branches and shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”

With a white shawl draped over his head, Jesus sat atop a colt and rode slowly down the path. Cloaks piled onto the back of the colt made a plush saddle. Up ahead, the clamoring crowd eagerly tossed their clothing and palm branches onto the road, their way of throwing down a red carpet.

“Hosanna!” they shouted. “Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!”

As always, spaced sporadically among the festive crowd, sulking Pharisees did their best to dampen the joy, casting stern looks and spewing lectures and sermons. Still, those ecstatic for Jesus far outnumbered those who wanted him dead. Maybe Jesus would

be safe until next Passover. Certainly, nobody in this crowd looked angry enough to kill him.

Todd and Alex hastened their pace again to catch up. Jesus just gazed ahead with a solemn look about him, his head bobbing slightly to the rhythm of the colt's gate. He seemed not to even notice the crowd.

Alex jumped up and down, bouncing his way sideways down the dirt path. "Todd, do you see this? It is a royal entry! They treat him as a king entering the city! By week's end he may well be king!"

Todd just smiled and took in the scene. He saw no reason to burst Alex's bubble. That would come soon enough.

They moved down the road toward Jerusalem. Reveling celebrants continued to follow, cheering, and waving palm branches. They kept shouting, "Hosanna in the highest!"

They topped a rock ledge and the whole of Jerusalem came into view, the white marble center of the Temple towering over the city like a crown. Just ahead was the City of David with its clusters of modest cubed homes that were overshadowed by the massive and ornate Herod's temple.

Jesus held up his hand and the caravan ground to an awkward stop.

Without warning, Alex ran ahead and joined Loudas. Todd hurried to Alex's side. Loudas stood next to a camel, counting coins from a purse and mumbling to himself.

"Loudas," Alex said. "Look at this! A royal reception must signal a new king!"

Loudas just stood there and frowned at three coins in his hand. "I was certain there were forty-eight shekels in my purse." His eyes darted around suspiciously at the

other apostles. “I keep careful count of every last coin and I am certain there were forty-eight when we stopped at Bethany last night.”

Alex threw out his arms in exasperation. “Loudas! Look around you! This is more important than a few coins. This is history!”

Loudas glanced up from his bag and observed the cheering hoard as if noticing them for the first time. “Yes, this is quite a reception, is it not? Pity.” He crimped his lips and shook his head. “I fear they waste their palm branches. They dirty their cloaks for nothing.”

“Loudas,” Alex said, “what are you saying?”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “What’s the problem?”

Loudas dropped the coins into his purse, clamped it shut, and jammed it into his pocket. “It is what has *not* happened that confounds me. I must confess, I am not certain about Yeshua anymore. He seems to waver back and forth. I tell you, someone ought to force him to make up his mind.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked.

“Last night was a fine example. Simon the Leper hosted a dinner party in Yeshua’s honor. Every important man in Bethany was there. While we were reclining at the table, this woman named Mary comes straight up to us, breaks open an alabaster jar of expensive perfume—made of pure *nard*, of all things—and then proceeds to pour it all over Jesus’ feet. She wiped up the excess with her hair! Do you have any idea how expensive that perfume was?”

Todd and Alex looked at each other and shrugged.

“Almost a year’s wages! At least three hundred denarii! All I did was ask why the woman wasted such perfume when it could have been sold to feed the poor. But what did Yeshua do? He chastised me! He embarrassed me in front of everybody. He told me to leave her alone. ‘She did a beautiful thing,’ he said. Yet on other days he will tell us that if we have two cloaks, we should give one away to the man who has none.”

Alex stammered for words. “It could be that Yeshua knows he will soon be a king. That must be it. It is time for him to be treated as such. Perhaps that is why he did not mind the extravagance.”

“So tell me then, young Alex. How is he going to be king while he himself is still under the rule of Caesar? We must kill the Romans before he can take the throne. Yet he went so far as to heal the servant of a *Roman* Centurion. I tell you, it is so frustrating being one of his apostles. He is always giving us mixed signals. ‘Do not suppose that I come to bring peace to Earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword’, he will tell us. And then on other occasions he tells us to love our enemies. To *love* them! He even says that if our cheek were to get slapped, we should turn the other one as well.”

“I think you misunderstand,” Todd said. “I don’t think Yeshua is purposely bringing a sword. I think he’s just predicting what will happen. He knows the nature of man.”

Loudas curled his hawk nose at Todd. “Dare you suggest that you, a mere heathen Gaul, can interpret the words of Yeshua better than I can—a Jew by birth and one of his inner twelve.”

“Sorry,” Todd said. “I didn’t mean to suggest that—”

“Just look at him now!” Loudas jabbed an accusing finger toward Jesus. “Here is the great King of Israel, come to claim his throne. Yet, instead of raining fire to exterminate the Romans infesting this city, he weeps for it!” Loudas huffed, spun around, and plodded off toward Mount Olive.

Loudas was right. Jesus sat on his colt and wept bitterly. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he gazed upon the city. Heat washed over Todd’s face and his eyes began to water inexplicably. Something unthinkable was about to happen, and Jesus knew it. Todd and Alex caught each other’s stare, speechless for a moment.

Finally, Alex spoke. “What do you suppose is wrong with Yeshua?”

“You don’t want to know, Alex. Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

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Passover was sort of like the Fourth of July for Jews. It commemorated the time when death “passed over” the homes of the Jews, followed by their being freed from Pharaoh’s bondage in Egypt. The holiday was in full swing and Jerusalem was jam packed with outsiders.

It was the next day and Todd and Alex stood on the fringes of the Court of Gentiles among clamoring hoards of pilgrims crammed under the roofed portico. Dozens of vendor booths were loosely erected between thick stone support pillars. Human voices and the bleating sheep mixed with the sound of rams, bulls, and cooing doves. Feathers and bird dropping littered the white stone floor. Other livestock left their own offerings

upon the temple floor, as they swatted away flies with their tails. It looked more like a stable than the house of God.

Alex argued with a merchant who had inch long tufts of hair sprouting from his ears and severely misaligned eyes. It was hard to tell who the guy was looking at, Todd or Alex.

“Surely you cannot expect me to pay *ten shekels* for this scrawny lamb!” Alex said to the cross-eyed man. “The fixed scales of your crooked moneychangers have already robbed me, yet you attempt to strip the very money I need for my journey home.” Alex held up two fingers to demonstrate his point. “After two Roman tax booths and now the temple tax, how do you expect me to buy this lamb at your inflated prices?”

The man turned his head, fixing one of his eyes on Alex. “Yes, yes, and I also pay these taxes, as well as the first and second tithes for the priesthood, the redemption of the first-born, and, of course, the state tributes. That is why I have to charge these prices.”

Alex then held up six fingers. “I will give you six shekels.”

“I do not set the prices,” the man said. “I charge no more than any of the other booths. Now, for six shekels, I can give you a special deal on this pair of turtle doves.”

Alex jabbed a finger at the caged birds sitting on the table. “That one has a broken wing and the other is blemished! Do I look like a blind fool? If I did give you ten shekels for that lamb, you know as well as I do that most of the meat goes to the high priests. For God, there is only blood, a pinch of fat, and a shred of meat!”

Shouting erupted from the entrance to the portico. A tabled toppled over. Stacks of coins went airborne, clanging to the ground, scattering along the stone temple floor. Beggars scrambled toward the scene with wide eyes, scouring the floor for coins.

Worshippers cowered and hid behind stone columns. Others ran for the exit, while others stood on the sidelines, pointing and cackling as merchants chased after fleeing livestock. Another table went over. Birdcages cracked open on the ground. Doves flapped their wings and escaped to the sky.

Todd's eyes widened in horror as the perpetrator stepped into view. "Alex," he said, "tell me that isn't Yeshua."

"It is written," Jesus shouted and shook a whip in his hand. "My house will be a house of prayer for all nations.' But you have made it a den of robbers!"

Todd gripped his staff and readied himself for a fight. If they were going to seize Jesus, this could be the catalyst. But nobody made the slightest move to seize Jesus, even as he caught people by the arm and refused to allow them to carry their merchandise toward the temple. Two Temple guards rushed onto the scene. They came to a sudden halt as recognition dawned. One of the guards spoke to the other. Todd could barely hear what they said over the shouting.

"That is him!" the guard said. "I am certain of it. That is the very man who raised Lazarus of Bethany from the dead."

The other guard cautiously stepped backwards. "Anyone that makes a dead man come alive could just as easily make a live man dead."

Without another word, Jesus turned to leave. Several stunned apostles bunched defensively around him and escorted him out, leaving the merchants and moneychangers to their shattered booths.

Loudas came over and stood there with tightened fists pressed onto his hips. “Now that is certainly a change in attitude,” he said. “Yesterday Yeshua weeps for the city, today he curses it. Interesting, do you not agree?”

“How’s that?” Todd said.

“How his temper now flares, of course. Perhaps my words to you yesterday were simply the scorned servant in me venting frustrations. You must forgive my outburst. But he did embarrass me terribly, you understand.” Loudas shrugged and glanced around at the stunned crowd. “During festival time, the population in Jerusalem swells to three times its normal size. Jewish men of fighting age far outnumber the soldiers of Antonia. If there is to be a rebellion, it will be now.”

Todd smirked at Loudas. “Somehow I doubt he was crying because he was about to be crowned king.”

“You do not know Yeshua as I do, Todd of Livingston. He is a very complex and compassionate man. Perhaps he only weeps for the innocents that will be slain in battle. Who can be certain?” Loudas craned his neck and followed the progress of the apostles toward the exit. He slipped a piece of parchment from under his cloak and handed it to Alex. “I trust you can read Hebrew, Alexander. I fancy myself an aspiring psalm writer. Or perhaps I am too vain. Meditate on this when you are alone. Let me know what you think.”

Alex slid the parchment into his pocket. “Thank you, Loudas. I am honored.

“I should go now,” Loudas said and slipped into the crowd.

Todd held out his open hand. “Let’s see it.”

Alex forced at a dumbfounded look into his expression. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Let me see that note Loudas gave you.”

“It is not a note, but rather a psalm. You heard him say so.”

“I could use a soothing psalm about now. Let’s see what kind of poet Loudas thinks he is.”

“Very well, Todd,” Alex said and pulled the note from his pocket. “Persistence is an admirable trait.”

Todd took the parchment and unfolded it. He studied it for a moment and handed it back to Alex. “You know I only read Aramaic. Tell me what it says.”

Alex took the parchment. “I should teach you Hebrew sometime,” Alex said as he studied the parchment. He lost color in his cheeks and his expression turned dire.

“That bad, huh?”

Alex creased the parchment and slid it back into his pocket. “He is no David, I assure you.”

“I could have told you that. Now tell me what it says.”

Alex sighed and handed the parchment back to Todd. “Very well, I cannot lie to you. It is no psalm at all. Rather it is instructions. There is to be a meeting among to zealots. It is to be held at the house of a man who they call Barabbas. That parchment is my invitation to attend.”

“I knew it,” Todd said. “I told you not to trust that guy.”

“But his intentions are noble. Why can you not see that?”

“If he’s so noble, then why did he lie and say that was a poem?”

“Is it not obvious, Todd? It is because of you! He knows that you are at odds with him. You have made that very clear.”

“He still lied. Would you put your trust in a man who chooses deceit over honesty? Is that what Yeshua would want of his followers?”

Alex cooled his anger as he mulled Todd’s words. Anger suddenly returned to his face. He snatched the parchment back from Todd and shredded it, letting the pieces fall to the temple floor. “You are right. Deceit is not the trait of a man who claims to follow Yeshua. I cannot believe he blinded me so. I feel like a fool.”

Todd gripped Alex’s shoulder firmly. “You’re just young, that’s all. There’s no shame in that.”

Alex affectionately patted the hand Todd had on his shoulder. “Come, Todd. Let us go to the marketplace. I promised my mother I would buy some bitter herbs for the Paschal supper.”

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Later that week, Jesus was back preaching in the temple. A crowd of peasants listened in rapt attention. Pharisees and Sadducees stood sulking off to the sides. Todd and Alex leaned against a pillar and studied the crowd for the least hint of trouble—not that they were in a position to stop trouble if it erupted. They were greatly outnumbered. Fortunately, half of this number was on Jesus’ side. It still didn’t make him feel any better. He had history to blame for that.

“The greatest among you will be your servant,” Jesus shouted into the crowd. His voice was hoarse from a long day of preaching. “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Peter stepped onto Jesus' raised platform and handed him a cup of water. Jesus drank slowly. He handed the cup back to Peter and used his sleeve to blot the droplets of water clinging to his beard.

Todd was famished. Maybe Jesus would call it a day. After all, he had been preaching on overdrive. He seldom preached for this long of a stretch, and never with as much urgency in his increasingly raspy voice.

Jesus' eyes darted around the crowd as he mulled over his next words. When his eyes fell upon a pack of frowning, oily bearded Pharisees, Todd knew he wouldn't eat any time soon. Things were about to get ugly.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of Heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."

The crowd gasped and the Pharisees seethed with anger. But Jesus was far from done.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" Jesus pointed an accusing finger. "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."

The Pharisees jaws dropped open in astonishment. A mere peasant from Galilee had just called them sons of hell.

"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift

on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?"

"Listen to him shame those Pharisees!" Alex said. "Those Pharisees who would see my daughter die before breaking the Sabbath. This alone was worth four days of travel."

"I wish I shared your enthusiasm," Todd said. "You're forgetting half these people already think he's a false prophet. Some even think he's a friend to the Romans."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying if he keeps this up, they're going to arrest him, that's what I'm saying."

"Nonsense. They cannot touch him. Yeshua would strike them all dead with a glance."

Loudas emerged from the crowd and stood accusingly before Alex. "Were my instructions not clear, Alexander? Were my directions not precise?"

Todd moved between Alex and Loudas. "Nice *psalm*, Loudas. Sorry, but we had to skip your little meeting."

"We needed you," Loudas said. "Two more men might have made a difference."

"You blind guides," Jesus shouted. "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

Alex skillfully changed the subject. "Do you see how his anger flairs? Do you think he is ready to act?"

Loudas eyed Jesus warily and anxiously shifted his weight on his feet. “Yes, he is angry, that is a fact.” He bit his lower lip and moisture built in his eyes as he watched Jesus rail at the Pharisees. “But he is angry at the wrong people! Why does he waste his time confronting the Sanhedrin when he can utterly destroy our oppressors? If he is going to act, then he must act quickly!” A tear swelled from Loudas’ eye and streamed down his reddened face. Loudas snatched the turban off his own head. He cupped it over his face and sobbed bitterly.

Todd and Alex stared at each other utterly perplexed. Finally, Alex said something. “Loudas, why do you weep? Has something happened? Something we are not aware of?”

Loudas pulled the turban from his face. He made three quick swipes with his fingers through his shoulder-length, greasy black hair to smooth it out. He swallowed hard to compose himself. “Have you not heard?”

“No,” Alex said. “We have heard nothing.”

“It is Barabbas! The Romans have seized him! It was at the meeting I urged you to attend. They broke into the home and slaughtered half the men there. They arrested the others along with Barabbas.”

Todd jabbed a finger into Loudas’ chest. “In other words, you almost got Alex killed!”

“Romans were killed as well,” Loudas said. “If we had more men, we could have saved Barabbas. He is a crucial ally! If we are going to take Jerusalem, we must have Barabbas on our side. Don’t you see, Alex? The Romans plan to crucify Barabbas! My dear friend, Barabbas!” Loudas sobbed into his turban again.

Angry shouts drowned out Jesus' voice. They watched as Jesus and some of the apostles slipped away out a back exit, while the crowd argued amongst themselves.

“I tell you,” Loudas said and sniffed at the tears. “Yeshua holds the power to free Israel. Just yesterday, a large fig tree withered at the very sound of his voice. Truly, he holds the power. Why he tarries, I cannot say. But I do know this. He must act quickly.”

## Chapter 25

Todd watched as the hostile crowd argued over Jesus. Things were heating up fast. This must be the week Jesus was crucified. He could feel it. Even Loudas was apprehensive, as if something within him knew a crisis was at hand. He'd said Jesus must act quickly. Was that how Jesus was arrested? Did his own actions get him arrested? If this were indeed an alternate universe, would the same events lead up to the arrest of Jesus? Something had to be done quickly to destabilize the fast moving chain of events, to disrupt the flow of time over history. Todd couldn't stall anymore.

Todd turned to Alex. "We need to talk to Yeshua. Where do you think he went?"

"Why do you wish to trouble Yeshua, Todd?"

“Alex, look around you. Don’t you see these angry faces? If we don’t do something, they’re going to arrest Yeshua and crucify him. Don’t ask me how I know.”

Alex almost laughed, but couldn’t seem to bring it out.

“Alex, where do you think Yeshua went?”

“I cannot be certain. However, I have heard he enjoys the Garden of Gethsemane. He goes there to rest in the shade.”

“Then let’s go,” Todd said.

“Surely you are mistaken, Todd. How could they crucify the very Son of God? Such an attempt would be suicide. I would very much like to see them try.”

It was a waste of time trying to convince Alex. It was clear he would only be a hindrance. “You’re right Alex. You go on to your father’s house. Help your mother with dinner. I just want to talk to the apostles about something first.”

“Why do you trouble the apostles?”

“I got to go,” Todd said and moved into the crowd. “I’ll see you at your father’s house,” he called back as he dodged spectators.

Todd went out the Golden Gate, down a flight of steps, and hurried along the arched bridge that crossed the jagged, rocky cliffs of the Kidron Valley. Ahead, at the foot of Mount Olive, a thicket of cypress, fig, and pomegranate trees were randomly scattered among mostly olive trees. Concealed somewhere inside that thicket of trees was this garden Alex spoke of, this favored hangout of Jesus and the apostles.

Todd reached the end of the bridge and followed a winding trail into the trees, ducking under low hanging branches as he went. He came to a sloped opening in the trees. Poorly maintained flowerbeds dotted the grounds. Several of the apostles sat

around in the shade, discussing the day's events. There was the fine robed Matthew sitting off to the side, jotting words onto a scroll as the others argued.

Matthew looked up from his scroll and brought his pen to his chin. "Todd of Livingston, servant of the late Eleazar."

"You've got a good memory," Todd said.

"Sadly, my memory is not as remarkable as you suggest. That is why I write down the words of Yeshua onto my scrolls, lest I forget. Someday I plan to pull all of my writings together to form a cohesive manuscript."

"Somehow, I don't doubt you," Todd said.

"So tell me, Todd of Livingston. What brings you here to our serene hideaway?"

"I need to speak with Yeshua. I don't mean to take up his time, but this can't wait."

Matthew looked troubled. "Yeshua is praying in the cave that holds the olive press. We do not disturb Yeshua when he is communing with his Father. Is there any message you would like me to deliver?"

Just then, Peter came down the hill mumbling, dark eyes under bushy eyebrows glazed over with concern.

"Peter just came from Yeshua," Matthew said. "Ask him if Yeshua will see you."

"I'll do that," Todd said and walked over to cut off Peter's advance.

"Peter," Todd said.

Peter stopped and looked straight at Todd, but no recognition dawned.

"I'm Todd of Livingston, the servant of Eleazar."

Peter snapped out of his trance and his brows hiked up. “Ah, yes. Peace be with you, Todd of Livingston. It is a terrible thing that happened to Eleazar. He was a holy man.”

“Listen,” Todd said. “I really need to talk to Yeshua. Any way he’ll see me?”

“At the moment, he is in prayer. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“It’s not me that needs the help. It’s Yeshua. Doesn’t anyone see what’s going on down there,” Todd said, hiking his thumb towards Jerusalem. “Those Pharisees aren’t going to put up with Yeshua anymore. I think they plan to arrest him.”

Peter came alive with alarm. “How do you know this?”

“Let’s just say I’ve got insider information. You need to pack up and leave Jerusalem before it’s too late.”

“They intend to kill Yeshua.”

“Yes,” Todd said. “You need to leave town. Go back to Galilee, at least for a few weeks.”

Peter stared at the ground a long moment. “Yeshua knows what they intend to do. He has made no secret of this.”

“Then convince him to leave!”

“I have tried. And do you know what he told me? He said ‘if you wish to follow me, you too must take up your cross and come after me.’ He will not listen to me. What else can I do?”

“Can you at least get him to tone down his attacks on the Pharisees? Those guys mean business. Sermons like the one Yeshua just gave are not exactly helpful.”

“I have known Yeshua for three years now,” Peter said. “He has never been one to withhold the truth for fear of offending. If he sees injustice, he responds with truth and vigor. Would you expect anything else from him?”

“No, of course not. I just think you should just leave town for the week. Just until things cool off. At least lay low for a few days.”

“I share your concerns, Todd of Livingston. Believe me, I do. However, I am not in charge of this ministry and Yeshua does not take suggestions from dumb, hardheaded fishermen such as me. His commission is from above. We must trust that his decisions are sound. Listen, friend. You have been very helpful. You wield your staff like a true warrior. Perhaps with your staff and my sword, we can hold off a legion of soldiers,” he said with a grin. “But Yeshua will say what he will say. No man can prevent that.”

Just then, Jesus walked past and started down the path toward the bridge with several of the other apostles in tow.

Peter watched them move through the trees toward Jerusalem. “Bring your staff, Todd of Livingston. I have a feeling we are about to bruise more feelings.”

## Chapter 26

Alex's uncle and three brown skinned, thinly bearded nephews sat on pillows at a low table across from Todd, Alex, and Simon. They had made the long journey from Cyrene by crossing the Mediterranean on a merchant ship, then making their way from Joppa on foot. The aroma of lamb, wine, unleavened bread, and bitter herb sauce mixed in the air with the smell of burning lamp oil. The unleavened bread, called matzah, was more like a big, not so crispy cracker. They ate it to commemorate the fact that the Jew's great escape from Egypt was so swift that there was no time for the bread to rise.

Todd impatiently nibbled on the matzah, hoping this was finally the end of the mind numbing, four hour long Paschal Supper. It involved symbolic rituals and periodic singing, with a compulsory glass of wine consumed at the end of each hour. The best part

was when they passed around bitter, eye watering, sinus clearing pieces of horseradish root, dipped in charoseth, a sweet mixture made from nuts, apples, and wine. This represented the ancestor's pain, made bearable only by the sweetness of the hope of the promise land.

Todd closed his eyes and tried to follow along as Simon delivered the final drawn out prayer. His mind wasn't exactly with the plight of the Jewish nation just now. How was he going to save the Son of God from an excruciating demise? Should he even try? Was he so arrogant that he actually believed he would succeed? How was one physician from North Carolina going to fight off a legion of Roman soldiers? Or was it the Jewish Temple guard that seized Jesus? If he hadn't been so intentionally ignorant of the gospels, he could have formulated a plan by now.

After a couple more hours of socializing, it was late into the night when they finally settled down for sleep.

"You seem restless," Alex said. "Perhaps you would like more wine."

"I am restless, Alex. I'm worried about the Pharisees. I think they are going to have Yeshua arrested."

"I too am troubled, but it is not because of the Pharisees. It is because of what Judas said. He said that Yeshua must act quickly. What do you think he meant by that?"

"I'm not sure, Alex, I . . . what did you just call him?"

"My apologies, Todd. I was referring to Loudas. Judas is his name in Hebrew—Judas Iscariot. But there is another apostle named Judas so I prefer to call him by his Greek name, Loudas. Some people refer to the other Judas as Thaddaeus, but that one

looks more like a Judas to me. Don't you think Judas Iscariot looks more like a Loudas? Perhaps it is because of his crooked nose."

"That name," Todd said. "Judas. It sounds familiar. I've heard it somewhere before."

"I am certain you have. It is a very common name."

"Apparently. Look, I'm going to pass on the wine. We'll talk in the morning."

Later that night, snores and snorts resounded against stone walls. Alex, Rufus, and the two cousins were fast asleep on the floor of the main hall by the front door. Todd lay awake next to them, watching faint orange light dance on the ceiling, cast by the glow of red embers in an open hearth. Until summer was back, sleep would not come easily. The crucifixion would happen in spring. That was any time now. Or was it next spring, or the next? Clearly, the Pharisees wanted Jesus dead, but other than Jesus' tears and Loudas's strange behavior, there was no hint that the Sanhedrin had mustered enough momentum to pull off an arrest. Jesus had far too many followers in Jerusalem. If they tried to seize Jesus in the light of day, all out war would erupt. The troubling part was that Jesus wasn't even in Jerusalem. Last he'd heard Jesus celebrated the Paschal Supper in Bethany with the apostles.

The word supper flashed an image into his mind—the *Last Supper*, by Leonardo Da Vinci. Then Loudas Iscariot came to mind. Make that *Judas* Iscariot. Why was that name so familiar? The Last Supper brought another word to mind. It was *betrayal*.

Todd's heart hammered in his chest and all the pieces came together. Judas was going to betray Jesus. He clearly recalled the legend of Judas bandied about by Christians. It must be true. Only the betrayal wasn't about hatred. It was the only way to

save Barabbas. Judas was going to force Jesus' hand, to force fire from heaven. He would have Jesus arrested and then assume Jesus would fight to defend himself—and destroy the entire Roman army if necessary.

Todd clawed at his beard as he wracked his brain. When would it happen? Jesus had to be arrested at night while his fans slept. That much was obvious. Judas would know where Jesus slept at night. Everyone knew the resurrection was Easter Sunday. And since the Jews would violently protest a crucifixion on the Sabbath, which would begin in roughly eighteen hours, at sundown, there was only one time they could arrest Jesus—*tonight!*

## Chapter 27

Todd scrambled for his sandals. He quietly strapped them on and reached for his staff, taking care not to wake Alex or the other men. If Alex knew what was happening, he would only ask questions there was no time to answer.

Todd crept for the front door and noticed Alex's sword leaned against the doorframe, barely visible in the dim light. He eyed the sword warily. Was he prepared to kill Judas? He didn't have to. One sword swipe to the achilles tendon would do the trick. He gently lifted the sword by its sheath and slid it behind his belt. One way or another, Judas would be stopped—if Todd wasn't already too late. He lifted the locking crossbar and leaned on the door. The door creaked and whined as it slowly opened.

"Todd?" Alex mumbled, still half asleep. "Is that you?"

Todd stopped cold. He'd been caught. "Uh, just going to the privy," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"Of course," Alex said and turned onto his other side. "The wine now leaves the body." He chuckled softly and drifted back into slumber.

Todd crept outside and closed the door behind him. He jogged down the torch lit street toward the Temple grounds. Jesus was in Bethany, about a mile outside the city walls. If his legs held up, he'd be there in twenty minutes. He reached the wall by the Lion's gate, lifted a burning torch from its mount, and ran into the darkness, down the dirt path that led into the Kidron Valley. Ahead, dozens of torches moved toward the bridge that crossed the Kidron Valley toward the Temple grounds. Todd slowed to a halt and caught his breath as he studied the moving torches.

"No!" He tore down the hill in a panic and reached the bend of the valley. He then forged up the hill toward the Garden of Gethsemane. His aging legs started to give out and he had to stop, heaving air into his yearning lungs. He moved his torch to the side to better see the torches ahead, studying their movement. Torchlight gleamed off metal helmets and the tips of spears pointing up. They were just reaching the bridge. Did they already have Jesus? Was he too late? If so, he'd have to plow through a dozen soldiers that were hemmed in by the side rails of the bridge. Maybe they were just doing security rounds.

Todd started forward again, but stopped at the sound of footsteps pounding up the path toward him. He held the torch out for a better look. "What, the . . ."

A buck-naked teenager sprinted toward him. Todd reached out and grabbed the kid's arm. "Hey, slow down, son! What's going on?" Todd did a double take on the kid's bare behind. "And what happened to your clothes?"

The breathless teen managed to speak. "They have . . . they have seized the Master! The Rabbi from Galilee! The Temple Guard has arrested Yeshua. They tried to seize me, but I pulled out of my garment and escaped."

Todd collapsed to his knees. "I'm too late. God forgive me, I'm too late."

Or was he? Todd dropped the torch and pulled his outer cloak over his head, leaving the two remaining layers of cloak intact. "Put this on before you catch pneumonia," he said to the boy.

The boy fed his body into the cloak. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank me later. Just tell me what you know. Where are they taking him? There's still a chance we can save him."

"I heard one say they are taking Yeshua to the Sanhedrin. That means they will go to the palace of Caiaphas and Annas, the high priests. I can take you there."

"No, kid, you go home. I know where it is. Right next to Herod's Palace."

"That is right, to the south of the city."

"Go on, now. And keep the cloak!" Todd watched the kid scamper up the path. "And tell everyone you know what happened!"

It would take a small army to save Jesus now. Todd had to muster this army quickly and block the guards before they entered the walls of the high priest's palace.

He snatched up his torch and dashed back up the hill. He entered the Lion gate, and plodded down the street to Simon's house. He burst through the door.

“Alex! They’ve arrested Yeshua! Get up!”

Stunned and groggy, Alex, Rufus, and the two cousins came alive and shielded their eyes from torch light. Simon and his brother burst into the room with disheveled hair.

“Todd!” Alex said. “What is the meaning of this?”

“They have arrested Yeshua!”

“So it has begun,” Alex said, his voice ringing with awe. “Loudas was right. God’s wrath will soon be upon this city.”

“No, Alex, you don’t understand! It wasn’t the Romans that arrested Yeshua. It was the Temple guard. It’s the Sanhedrin that wants him dead, not the Romans.”

“Surely, you are mistaken, Todd. The Sanhedrin has no power to execute a man. Perhaps you have misunderstood. Yes, that must be it. They are escorting Yeshua to his throne!”

“Alex, they are going to crucify him!”

Alex’s father came forward. “That is preposterous! Where did you hear such a thing?”

“Never mind where I heard it. But I promise you, if we don’t stop the guard before they reach the palace of the high priest, it will happen and it will happen today!”

“Be reasonable, Todd, that is impossible,” Alex said. “If Yeshua is the Son of God, who can stand against him?” Alex glanced down at Todd’s waist. “Is that my sword? You said you would no longer carry a sword. Todd, why are you acting strangely?”

“He is acting like a mad man,” Simon said. “I should have never let this crazed gentile into my home.”

“Perhaps a demon has taken him,” Rufus said.

“I am not possessed! Please, listen to me. If we don’t hurry, it’ll be too late. Grab a weapon. We don’t have much time!”

Simon went to his room and returned with a large club. “Leave this house now! If my son listens to you, it will be he that is crucified. I will not allow that.”

Todd was speechless. He glanced around at the faces of frightened young men and he knew Simon was right. He had to honor his promise to Priscilla. He wouldn’t leave her a widow.

Without a word, Todd slipped out the door and ran to the next house. He hammered on the door with the butt of his sword. “Wake up! They have arrested Yeshua! They are taking him to the Sanhedrin!”

## Chapter 28

Todd leaned against a wall just outside the palace of the high priest, heaving air into his lungs, his legs like rubber. He'd banged on nearly every door along the way, shouting the news till he was hoarse. Nobody dared open the door to a screaming madman in the middle of the night.

He was too late. The torch lit procession of Pharisees and guards passed under the arched stone doorway of the palace. A solemn figure dressed in a scarlet cloak moved willingly under the doorway, flanked on both sides by spear toting Temple guards.

Finally, from all directions of the city, people spilled into the town square in front the palace. Word had gotten out.

Todd dropped the torch and formed a megaphone over his mouth with his hands. “People! Listen to me! They have arrested Yeshua of Nazareth, the miracle worker from Galilee. He is the Messiah promised by the prophets! But they will kill him if you don’t do something!”

Todd watched and read their faces. They only grumbled among each other. “Listen to me! We can storm the palace and take Yeshua back! But we must all do it at once. They are outnumbered. They won’t be able to stop us all! If you want your Messiah we must fight!”

A few people slowed to regard Todd’s words, but then proceeded toward the palace as if he were just a crazy, homeless wino voicing his delusions.

Peter and John hastened up the incline toward the palace. Todd fell in behind them and moved up the slope. Peter stopped in front of the palace and stood with paranoid eyes watching the bystanders as he warmed his hands over a charcoal fire. John went ahead to the palace, spoke a few words to a guard who stood sentry under the entrance, then slipped into the palace without a second look from the guard.

Peter stood among several other men as they discussed the events of the evening, the red glow of the fire casting long shadows on the palace wall.

Todd moved in closer. “Peter, I told you this would happen. We have to get in there and do something.”

Peter squinted in the dim light as recognition dawned. “I tried, Todd of Livingston. I did try to stop them,” Peter said. “There were too many of them.”

“We can still try, Peter. John got in. Why can’t we just go in?”

“John’s family is well connected. I have no such luxury.”

“Then we need to gather a mob and storm the place.”

“I have tried the violent approach, but Yeshua rebuked me and told me to put away my sword. I will not disobey his command.”

“But we have to do something!”

Peter just gazed into the flames, nodding his head in denial. “He betrayed him with a kiss. Did you know that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Judas, that conniving scoundrel.” Peter snapped his gaze toward Todd. “He betrayed his Master by kissing him on the cheek!”

“He *kissed* Yeshua? Is he out of his mind?”

“Clearly,” Peter said. “I do not know what he was thinking.”

Movement from the palace caught Todd’s attention. It was Judas Iscariot, walking quickly away from the palace, clutching a small bag in his hand. “Why don’t we ask him ourselves?” Todd said.

Peter sneered but did not move. “You ask him if you like. My anger will only add murder to my list of sins.”

Todd cut Judas off. He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him hard. “A *kiss*, Judas! You betrayed the very Son of God with a kiss?”

Judas pulled away and clutched a leather pouch defensively. “I only did what he asked me to do. And profited thirty silver coins in the process.”

“He asked you to betray him? Are you crazy?”

“He said it in front of everybody. ‘What you are about to do, do quickly’, he told me. So I did what I was told to do.”

“Judas, they’re going to crucify him!”

“Nonsense,” Judas said. “His arrest was a charade, a lure to bring him before the entire Sanhedrin. He wishes their cooperation before all out war erupts. When Yeshua reveals himself, they will not be able to smite his cheek, let alone kill him.”

“No, Judas. You’re wrong. They intend to kill him.”

Anger flashed across Judas’ face. “Then if I am wrong, Yeshua deserves whatever fate awaits him. That will be his punishment for misleading us. But I tell you that I am not wrong.” Metal coins clanged as he jammed the pouch into his pocket and stalked off into the night.

“You’re going to regret this, Judas!” Todd called after him.

Todd glanced back at Peter and caught a glimpse of him just he entered the palace with John.

Time was running out. Something had to be done now, before the Romans heard the news and sent troops. Todd cupped his hands around his mouth yelled again. “People, listen to me! They have arrested Yeshua, the miracle worker from Galilee. If we don’t do something they will crucify him!”

“Miracle worker?” a voice cried from the crowd. “Tricks of the devil!”

“Beguiled us he did,” another voice shouted.

“No, that’s not true! He is your Messiah! If we are going to save him, we have to storm the palace before the Romans show up.”

“You there!” a voice yelled from behind.

Todd spun around. A boyish Roman soldier ran his way.

Todd dashed for the darkened street beyond the building corner and stalled in front of the burning torch he'd dropped moments before. Footsteps closed in on him. He was too old to outrun that young soldier—unless the young soldier couldn't run.

Todd spun around and unsheathed his sword in one fluid movement. The soldier caught up. Todd swiped at the soldier's foot. He missed, igniting sparks on the pavement stone. The soldier stomped on Todd's sword, knocking it from his grip. Todd bent to the ground and grasped at his sword. The soldier's shield slammed into Todd's head, knocking Todd backward to the ground next to the burning torch. The soldier stepped over with drawn sword, poised to strike.

Todd snatched the torch and thrust it into the soldier's red cape. The cape ignited. The soldier dove for the ground and rolled frantically, trying to extinguish the flames.

Todd clamored to his feet and started down the darkened street, the young soldier's frantic, childlike cries echoing off stone walls. He was just a boy.

Todd quickly shrugged out of his secondary cloak, spun back around, and lunged at the burning soldier. He came down on the squirming kid with his outstretched cloak and smothered the flames, patting the cloak down causing puffs of smoke to shoot out to the sides. He heard still more shouts and footsteps coming his way. He glanced up. The butt of a spear streaked toward his face.

## Chapter 29

Todd came to again. He blinked his eyes rapidly to regain focus. His head throbbed, he was nauseated, and the ringing in his ears wouldn't let up. At least now, his vision wasn't so blurry. Intracranial bleeding was unlikely. He reached up and gently fingering the lump on his forehead, then inspected the dried, crimson residue painting his fingertips. The bleeding had finally stopped.

He hadn't a clue how long he'd been unconscious before the first time he'd come to. He'd waken up on a cold stone floor, surrounded by more stone walls and a heavy wooden door preventing his escape. That's all he knew. He'd yelled repeatedly, despite the brutal waves of cerebral pain with each pleading wail. Only his echo returned.

If Jesus weren't already hanging on that cross, he soon would be. Tears were but salty streaks on Todd's cheeks now, as grief melted into acceptance. God's will be done, regardless of the futile efforts of a cocky physician from North Carolina. At least he tried. Surely, his efforts would help argue his case on that terrible Day of Judgment—if God's opinion could possibly be swayed by such desperate acts of self-redemption.

It didn't matter anyway. What was done was done and there had to be a reason for it all. The terrible suffering Jesus now endured could not be in vain. Science taught that even the simplest form of life had precise reasons for the size and tilt of even the smallest molecule. If God put that much thought into something as simple as a blade of grass, surely there had to be reason behind the death of his only Son.

Todd closed his eyes and prayed silently, moving his lips to the words, as he gradually slipped back into unconsciousness.

The sound of footsteps outside the door jarred him back to life. He eyed the door warily. He could only imagine the agony Jesus now suffered. The sound of Peter's words reverberated in his thoughts. Would he soon literally take up his cross and follow after Jesus? Was that his only ticket to Heaven—by suffering unrelenting hours of agony as penance for a wicked life lived? It's what he deserved.

Todd instinctively curled into the fetal position. "Oh God help me, please," he said in a whimper.

The door burst open and two Roman soldiers stepped through the doorway. The tall, lanky one unsheathed his sword and jabbed it toward Todd. "There are three more soldiers outside that door. Do not try to escape."

Todd uncoiled his body and sat up right. Maybe Alex made bail.

A balding, rotund soldier with a more elaborate uniform stood with his fists balled on his hips. In one hand, he held a short club with three thin leather ropes dangling past his bare knees. Imbedded onto the ropes, sharp metal shards protruded from equally spaced knots, ending with a metal hook dangling at the bottom.

Noticing Todd's eyes on the whip, the rotund officer snorted with delight and held up his prize. "Do you admire my flagrum? Because of the hooks on its end, we like to call it the scorpion. There is a design flaw, however. Occasionally the hooks get imbedded into a man's spine. It takes extra effort to yank it away." He smiled broadly. The lanky soldier chuckled to himself and slid the sword back into his sheath.

Todd backed away, scooting himself along the floor. "Now, just take it easy. We can work this out. Don't I get a lawyer?"

The lanky soldier chuckled again.

"A lawyer, you say?" the round officer said. "Show me your Roman citizenship papers. Then we can discuss legal options."

Todd patted down his cloak. "I must have left them at home. Let me post bail and I'll bring them back later."

"A crafty one, this is," the officer said. "Did you also find your sword missing? You did not leave *that* at home."

"That wasn't for you guys," Todd said. "The sword was for a man named Judas."

"Is that why you brandished it on one of my soldiers? Enough of this nonsense. Inciting a rebellion is punishable by crucifixion. I suggest you make your plea to your invisible, no-named God. You will get no sympathy from Rome."

Todd stared at the man, grappling with the accusation. “What do you mean, inciting a rebellion? That’s not what I was trying to do. I just wanted the Sanhedrin to free Yeshua. Rome has nothing to do with this.”

“Of course, of course. Yeshua the Nazarene,” the lanky soldier said, knowingly nodding his head. “The Jew from Galilee. The *king* of the Jews, no less. I hung that sign myself.”

Todd rose from the ground and stood slowly, still dizzy from his wound. “What are you talking about?”

“After we nailed your *king* to the timbers,” the tall one said. “I myself hung a sign above his head, written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so everybody could read it. ‘Yeshua the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.’”

Todd leaned back against the wall, his eyes lost on the floor. “So it’s true then? I am too late.”

“You admit it! You tried to free the man who would be your king. But surely, you know that *Herod* is your king. And Herod answers to Caesar. Therefore, the purpose of freeing your king was to overthrow Herod. That is treason, punishable by death.”

“No,” Todd said. “That’s not what Yeshua is about. His kingdom is not of this world.”

The fat officer grinned at the skinny one. “You see,” he said, shaking a finger at Todd. “I told you. They claim an otherworldly kingdom. But you did not believe me.” He snapped his head back to Todd. “Save your arguments for Pilot. We are only here to have you flogged. If you do not bleed to death by the end of your Jewish Sabbath, then we will nail you to the timbers. The crows will be picking your eyes out soon enough.”

“No!” Todd said. “You can’t do this!”

The officer gestured toward the door and two more soldiers rushed in. They clutched Todd by the wrists and dragged him out of the cell as Todd yanked and squirmed to get free. “No! Please, wait!” They pulled him into an opening in the dungeon and wrestled his arms to a waist high stone block that was saturated with dried blood. Two more soldiers held him in place as they bound his wrists to the block with leather straps. Todd hunched over the block, straining at the straps. “Please, you don’t have to do this!”

“Do you likewise admire my whipping post? I prefer to have my victims hunched over. I find it more useful to bring my blows down on a man’s back, using the pull of the earth to aide my aging arms. If I whip horizontally, my shoulder starts to ache after the first twenty lashes. This way I have strength for the full forty.”

“Forty! Please, be reasonable!” Todd said craning his neck, trying to face the officer. “You’ll rip every bit of skin off my back!”

“Normally, it would indeed leave you a bleeding mass of torn flesh. However, you are in luck. I exhausted some of my strength on your *king* outside the castle today. Naturally, his was a public flogging. He was a tough one, that king of yours, standing there stoically with those thorns digging into his scalp. He winced from the pain, but he never asked me to stop.”

Suddenly, sharp pain dug into Todd’s neck. It was the fabric of his final cloak tugging against his skin as it ripped away, exposing his bare back.

“Alright, men. Stand back so I can finish this.”

“Oh, God in Heaven, please help me,” Todd said. He braced himself for the bitter bite of the first blow.

## Chapter 30

A deep voice boomed into the room. “Officer! Hold your flagrum!”

Silence followed an awkward moment. Todd released the tension in his muscles. He strained to hear through ringing ears and throbbing pain in his head.

Finally, the rotund soldier spoke. “Centurion? I mean no disrespect, but how does this man concern you? And who is this man, this . . . *Jew*, standing by your side?”

Could that be Alex?

“The identity of this man does not concern you,” the centurion said. “Now cut your prisoner loose. I will see to him personally.”

“But centurion, this man is guilty of inciting a rebellion. You know the law.”

“I am aware of the law, soldier. However, your prisoner was not trying to incite a rebellion against Rome. His spiritual leader was illegally arrested by the Sanhedrin. He simply sought to have his leader released, not from our custody, but from that of the Sanhedrin. There was no crime against Rome.”

“Centurion, I fail to understand your interest. What concern is this man’s spiritual leader to you?”

“My motives are of no concern to you. Now release that man immediately or it will be you that is flogged for insubordination!”

“You cannot give me orders! Your uniform indicates you are from the Italian Regiment. You have no authority here.”

The argument paused for a moment before the centurion spoke again. “I am sorry about your servant. I have done all I can do.”

“I know you did, Cornelius,” the other Jew said. “Thank you for trying.”

That voice? It wasn’t Alex, yet it sounded so familiar. Todd pulled at the leather straps, craning his neck around. He still couldn’t see.

“If I may, centurion, I must earn my meager salary,” the officer said.

Todd braced himself for the first blow.

Suddenly, the room shook violently. Rock dust rained from the ceiling. Panicked shouts came from behind. The blood-soaked stone pedestal crumbled and released Todd’s leather binds. He sent his freed hands up to shield his head from falling debris.

“Earthquake!” the officer screamed. “Everybody outside, before the stones of this fortress crush us all!”

A hand fell on Todd's shoulder. "Now would be a good time to leave," said the familiar voice into Todd's ear.

Todd spun around. "Eleazar! You're alive!"

"Quickly, put this cloak on. It will aid in our escape."

Todd fed his arms into the cloak. Immediately, the pain in his head subsided and his thoughts cleared. He quickly understood why. "Jesus' cloak!" Todd said over the roar of rumbling walls. "This is the one that healed my feet."

"From now on, you will wear his cloak."

A support beam crashed down. Debris fell in a cloud of dust.

"This way!" Eleazar shouted.

Crouched low, they moved quickly out of the dungeon, exiting through doors left open by terrified soldiers. They jogged up the stairs and came to a hallway. Chaos clamored around them. Shouting soldiers fled for open space. Todd and Eleazar joined fleeing soldiers and ran unnoticed out into a walled courtyard.

The quaking ground settled. The roar of the earthquake fell silent. Soldiers in the courtyard composed themselves and refocused on their duty.

"This way," Eleazar said. "Hurry before they close the gate!"

Todd ran after Eleazar, making a frantic dash for freedom as the confused soldiers regrouped. A soldier on horseback galloped onto the scene and cut Eleazar off. He cocked his spear, poised to strike. The horse made eye contact with Eleazar and suddenly freaked, bolting upright, throwing the soldier violently to the ground.

"Be still!" Eleazar said and the horse immediately settled.

Eleazar reached up, gripped the horse's bridle, and hefted himself up to the saddle. The horse moved over to Todd and Eleazar's hand went down. "Hurry! Take my hand!"

Todd quickly gripped the hand, shoved his foot into the stirrup, and hefted himself over the saddle behind Eleazar.

"I have a way with animals," Eleazar called back. "Hold tight! This is going to get bumpy!"

Eleazar kicked at the horse. Todd hugged Eleazar's waste as the horse tore into a full gallop.

Eleazar yanked the reins to the side. The horse lurched left, and a spear whizzed by Todd's ear. Ahead soldiers pushed hard on heavy wooden doors to cut off the escape. Eleazar kicked harder and the horse galloped faster. An arrow hit the ground next to them, followed by several more shots from soldiers standing on the watchtower.

The gate opening narrowed. More arrows whizzed by. One arrow lodged into the saddle, narrowly missing Todd's leg. Soldiers shouted and dove out of the way as the horse rushed under the opening of the wall, narrowly squeezing past just as the gates closed.

The horse forged ahead into the crowded city streets as people scrambled out of the way. Eleazar jerked the rein left. The horse whinnied in protest, then cut left onto another street. A basket flew from a man's hand as he jumped aside, sending barley loaves flying. "Sorry!" Todd called back to the man.

They came to a steep earthen hill and the horse slowed, seemingly uncertain of the terrain. "Trust me, my friend," Eleazar said to the horse. He kicked its sides and snapped the rein. "You can do it!"

The horse gained momentum and attacked the hill. Its lungs fiercely puffed through flared nostrils. They reached the top of the hill and Eleazar jerked the rein to the right. He urged the horse out the Fish Gate, in the northeast corner of the city.

Eleazar prodded the horse down the road further out of the city. Barely audible over the sounds of the horse's gallop, the faint sound of women wailing called Todd's attention to his left. There was a hill with a jagged cliff that gave way to a flat face. Pits in the stone looked like lifeless eye sockets of a dried skull. Atop of the hill, a crowd encircled three crosses that bore three bloodied, tortured men. Almost everybody watched the center cross.

Eleazar pulled back on the rein and the horse plodded to a halt. He pulled the reign left and the horse turned to face the crosses. "I do not suggest we go in any closer," Eleazar said. "This horse wears a Roman saddle."

The bloody, slumping body of Jesus hung lifelessly from a wooden beam. A wave of grief washed over Todd and he choked back the emotion. "Why, Eleazar? Why didn't he save himself?"

Eleazar paused for a moment, gazing reverently at his fallen Master. "It is because he prefers to save you," Eleazar said. He kicked at the horse again, urging it toward the road leading to Bethany.

## Chapter 31

Eleazar had gone to fetch Alex for the journey back to Capernaum. Todd sat on the slope of Mount Olive with his knees drawn up to his chest. He watched a steady stream of pilgrims and pack animals flow out the Temple's Golden Gate, moving over the bridge across the Kidron Valley. The eight day festival of Passover was complete and it was time to go home. So far there were no warrant posters bearing Todd's likeness. Still, he wasn't about to set foot in Jerusalem again. Simon the Leper was gracious enough to give them lodging over the weekend. As for the apostles, word had it they were terrified the Sanhedrin would come after them next. They'd locked themselves up in an undisclosed home in Jerusalem.

Martha and her sister, Mary, were inconsolable. Lazarus almost died again from grief. Seeing Jesus' own mother mourn was particularly heartbreaking. The only reason Todd kept it together is because he knew the truth—Jesus would rise again. Any time now, Mary's weeping would turn into rejoicing, and not a minute too soon. That was why Todd sat alone on that hill. He just couldn't take the dark mood in Bethany anymore.

Eleazar came from behind and sat next to Todd. "Alex will meet us at Simon's home. We will set out for Capernaum tomorrow."

"I bet he was surprised to see you," Todd said.

"Indeed. At first, he thought I was a ghost. He calmed down somewhat when I reminded him what Jesus did for Lazarus."

"That's good. The kid's hyper enough as it is. Of course, Lazarus was only dead four days. You were gone months."

"I do apologize for the delay. However, it was beyond my control. I could not return until you had served God's purpose."

"I thought there was a purpose too. Obviously, I was wrong. If I wasn't supposed to save Jesus, why would God leave me down here all by myself?"

"You were not by yourself. You had Alex."

"Alex? He can hardly take care of himself. Timothy basically runs the inn."

"And that is one of the reasons you were left. It should be obvious to you. It was not for your sake, but for the sake of Alex. It was God's way of answering Priscilla's prayers. Had it not been for you, Alex would have become acquainted with zealots such as Barabbas. Without your influence, Alex would likely have been crucified as well. Alex

will have three more sons, two of whom will go on to become valuable disciples of Jesus.”

“Seriously? That’s good to hear. At least I did something right.”

“Yes, you have been of great value. But as always, there were other reasons you were left.”

“Such as?”

“You were also left for your own sake. As long as I am with you in the flesh, I hinder your spiritual development. You were on your best behavior around me, therefore hindering your free will. You needed to be tested.”

“So did I pass?”

“I warned you not to rewrite the gospels. Yet you tried nonetheless.”

“But I thought this was an alternate universe. I asked you about that, and you seemed to avoid the question.”

“That is because it was an absurd question. In truth, there are only two more alternate universes. You know them as Heaven and Hell.”

“Look, I’m sorry, Eleazar. But the longer Jesus lived, the more people he could reach. He was in his early thirties. Reaching Europe and Asia was a very real possibility. Besides, ‘do unto others,’ right? How could I possibly let Jesus die in such agony? Was that the Christian thing to do?”

“In your motives, you acted correctly. What you failed to understand is that the mission of Jesus was far more profound than the preaching of parables or the healing of a few cripples. He was also sent to fulfill prophecy.”

“So that was it? He suffered just because some old guy a thousand years ago said he would?”

“Of course not. As we have previously discussed, man had been warned that the cost of disobedience is death. Because God does not lie, that price had to be paid. Jesus died to settle the cost of rebellion.”

“So how does Jesus dying change anything?”

“If a judge imposes a fine, there is nothing to stop an innocent man from paying the fine in full. The ancient Jews were well aware of this loophole. That is why they sacrifice an innocent animal to atone for their sins. That is also why Christianity spread so rapidly among the Jews—because they understood what Jesus had done for them on that cross. The blood of Jesus was shed to make a new covenant between humans and God. By his death, man is reconciled to God, making possible the free gift of eternal life.”

Todd sat in long, silent contemplation. “It’s poetic, really,” he finally said. “I can’t think of a more compelling way for God to show his love for man.”

Shouting came from the trail down the mountain. Todd stood to see the commotion. A man charged up the path, fury burning in his eyes. Todd blocked the path with his arm. “Hey, buddy, what’s going on?”

The breathless man took a moment to compose himself. “It is terrible. Who would do such a thing?”

“What thing?” Todd asked. “What are you talking about?”

“His body! Somebody has desecrated the grave of Yeshua, the prophet from Galilee. They have stolen his body!” He pushed past Todd and hurried up the hill.

Todd watched the man frantically relay the message to another set of travelers. “Somehow,” Todd said, “I doubt grave robbers are behind this.”

“Yes, Todd. He has risen. You are now witnessing the most important event in human history. That earthquake that freed you from Antonia was like a tremor in the bottom of the ocean. At first, it will go unrecognized. However, in the years to come it will grow into a tidal wave that will wash over humanity, forever changing the lives of those touched by this water. The very empire that tortured, mocked, and crucified Jesus will soon be conquered by the one they murdered. Some day every nation will have heard the gospel of Christ.”

“I promise you,” Todd said. “I’ll do my part to make that happen.”

“The Gospel According to Todd?”

“Something like that. Only without the time travel twist.”

“That would be wise.”

“Unfortunately, I’m no good with parchments and scrolls. I could really use my laptop. So when are you taking me home?”

“Not just yet. We have unsettled business.”

## Chapter 32

The gentle current of the Jordan River flowed, nurturing a narrow desert oasis as it wound its way to the Sea of Galilee. Alex was safely at the inn with Priscilla and his two children. Alex understood that Todd and Eleazar had become traveling missionaries for the risen Jesus. And so having said farewell to Alex, Todd and Eleazar stood alone under the shade of a sycamore tree.

Eleazar removed his sandals and waded into the cool water. Todd bent down and started to untie the ankle straps that held his sandals in place. He suddenly became aware of another presence behind him. He glanced up, squinting from the light. The dark silhouette of a man stood behind glaring sun. Todd straightened, stepped out of his sandals, and turned to face the stranger.

Recognition dawned. He stumbled and splashed backward into the water, gasping from the rush of cold. He found his feet, but kept to his knees nonetheless as the waters moved gently against his waste.

“Is that you? You . . . you scared me.” He felt so stupid. It was all he could think to say.

Jesus stood there with a crisp, white robe undulating in the wind. He wore no head shawl, exposing several healed scars around his hairline. Though dead a full three days, his skin had a healthy glow and his eyes were wide and alive with zeal. “Todd, you do not have to fear me any longer.” Jesus moved into the water and stopped next to Eleazar, who knelt on one knee, with head bowed in respect. Jesus touched Eleazar’s chin and tilted his head up to meet his gaze. “Eleazar, you have done well with this one. I understand he was a challenge.”

Eleazar rose slowly to his feet. “It was you that convinced him, Lord. I was merely an escort.”

“You pleaded my case with grace, logic, and wisdom. You ministered to him well, as I am certain you will continue to aid in his spiritual growth.”

Todd stayed on his knees, trembling, eyes respectfully to the water.

“Please, Todd, stand. There is no need to fear me. It means no disrespect to look me in the eyes. That is the way I want everybody to look at me. Look into my eyes and hear what I have to say.”

Eleazar came over and helped Todd to his feet.

Jesus smiled warmly at Todd, waiting for him to speak. Todd took the hint and finally spoke. “Lord, I . . . I’m sorry . . . I should have—”

“You have done that already, Todd. You repented by the lakeshore. There is no reason to grieve for your past. Only strive to grow in the future.” Jesus laid a hand on Todd’s shoulder. A deep scar made a pit in Jesus’ wrist. “Now, I think we need to get you back home. If you stay any longer, I fear you will find your way into the Book of Acts,” Jesus said with an amused smile. “Without modern medical equipment and drugs, your skills are of no use to me here. In your time, you can use your gift as a medical missionary. Go home, Todd, and show people how much I have changed you. You will be a living testimony to me.”

“I understand, Lord. I’ll go wherever you can use me best.”

“I know that you will. But first, Eleazar has asked that I do something for you, a symbolic ritual that his kind is not allowed to perform. This ritual symbolizes the washing away of your sins. When I lower you down into the water, leave your former life in that water, and rise up to new, everlasting life. Do you understand the meaning of this?”

“I do.”

“Good,” Jesus said and took a step toward Todd. “All you need do is fall back into my hands.”

Todd’s heart fluttered wildly. He closed his eyes, covered his face, and put his full weight against Jesus as he slowly went into the water. He shivered slightly as the cool water engulfed him, cleansing as it flowed. Voices sounded, mixing with wet, gurgling water noise. The frigid water suddenly turned warm. Sounds muffled to silence. He felt as if he was rising, higher, higher, until all sensation faded into the stillness of nothing.

## Chapter 33

He was warm and dry, the feel of soft bed linens against his skin. He squeezed his eyelids tight against sunlight.

“Dillon, honey, stop playing with the curtain. Close it, please. The light is hurting Daddy’s eyes.”

“Sooooorrrryyyy,” a child’s voice said as the light dimmed.

Todd slowly relaxed the tension on his eyelids. “Laura? Is that you?” She gradually came into focus. And there was little Dillon, leaning against the wall with one knee bent, Nike sneaker tread against wallpaper.

“Todd? Can you hear me?”

“Laura? I thought you were leaving.” Todd tried to sit up, but searing pain pushed him back down.

Laura’s hand went to his chest. “Don’t try to get up. You’ve been in an accident. You’re banged up pretty bad—a concussion, a broken femur, and a lot of bruising. But you’re going to be okay. Eventually.”

“How long have I been out?”

“It was three days ago. You’ve been out since they brought you back.”

“Brought me back?”

Laura hesitated as she found her words. “You were dead, Todd. And now you’re alive. For some reason your heart stopped. It shouldn’t have. It was so weird. If you weren’t just a few yards from the ER, we would have lost you. They started CPR right away. They restarted your heart but it should never have stopped. Not from these injuries.”

Todd closed his eyes and sank back into the pillow with a slight grin on his lips. “That is weird, isn’t it?”

“Why are you smiling? Did you . . . see anything? You know, a light or something?”

Todd opened his eyes to her. “Why do you ask?”

She crimped her lips and studied him. “I don’t know. You just look, different. Almost like you’re at *peace*. It’s not like you. Must be the morphine.”

Todd considered his response. The full truth was not an option, nor was it necessary. A brief summary would suffice. “Yes, Laura, I did see something. You were right. God is real. And he loves even me.”

Laura's eyes watered. She pressed her hands flat together as if for prayer and brought her fingertips to her lips. "Todd, are you serious? Don't lie to me. What did you see?"

Todd held out his hand. She hesitated and finally took it.

"Todd, tell me. What did you see? I promise I won't tell."

"I saw."

"What?"

"I saw things I didn't deserve to see. I saw that you had been right all along."

"Dillon, honey, slide that chair over here."

Todd watched in wonder as his precious preschooler scooted the chair forward.

"Hi, Daddy," Dillon said. "You better now? I was scared."

"I'm much better now, sport. My right arm is fine. I can't wait to toss you a Nerf football with it." He turned his attention back to Laura. "That is, whenever I can make it up to Buffalo."

Laura released Todd's hand and sat in the chair, shifting nervously and tugging at her skirt.

"Laura, I know it's hard to accept, but I feel different. What I saw . . . I've changed. If you'll just give me another chance, you'll see that."

Laura sighed. "Well, it looks like you have another three weeks to prove it."

"What do you mean?"

Laura laughed to herself. "It was the weirdest thing. The morning of the move, this guy comes up to my door. He doesn't say who he is. I thought he was one of the

movers at first, but it was just this guy. He tells me the moving van had engine trouble. Then he tells me you had been in an accident.”

“Really?” Todd said. “Was it someone from the hospital?”

“I’ve never seen him around.”

“Is that all he said?”

“No, then he says I should reconsider the move. I asked him who he was, but he just said he was a friend of yours and walked away. Anyway, I couldn’t just leave while you were in the hospital. I called and had them reschedule the move in three weeks. So who was this guy, Todd?”

“Did you have trouble pinning down his race?”

“Now that you mention it, yes.”

“Did he have shoulder length hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and an almost unnaturally clear complexion? Did you have trouble placing his age?”

“That’s him alright. I’d put him in his early twenties, but he just seemed, I don’t know, much older. What a weirdo. How did you meet this guy?”

“His name is Eleazar. He’s a very good friend. But he was just leaving town. I doubt we’ll see him again.”

“That’s a strange name. It fits him, though.”

Todd reached out and took her hand again. “Things will be different now. I promise.”

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It was a cool, breezy March morning and Todd strode uneasily among the tombstones, scanning them as he went. He felt silly, almost superstitious doing this, but he needed it somehow. It would help him heal. And with Eleazar lurking about, there was a good chance the message would get relayed.

He eventually came across new grass protruding in a coffin-sized rectangle. At the head of the new grass a shiny new headstone commemorated the life of Jacob Thomas Simon. He averted his eyes from the grave. He focused on a white cloud in the sky as frigid wind whipped at the lapels of his jacket, making a mess of his thinning blond hair. "Sorry it's taken me so long to visit."

Todd stopped and scanned the cemetery for witnesses before starting again. "I guess I owe you an apology. I've been a real jerk. Sorry about that. It's a lame apology but it's the best I can do. I guess I should also thank you. You probably know this already, but you got your dying wish. I'm a believer now. It's because of you that life is so good. I have peace and purpose. I've also got my family back. My mother and I even talked, just before she died."

A vibration tickled his hip. "Hold on a second," he said and reached for his pager. He read the message and clipped the pager back onto his belt. "I was afraid of that. I'm on call today. I'll have to make this fast. Anyway, I've read the whole Bible. I was relieved to see some stubborn fool named Todd of Livingston wasn't mentioned."

His pager buzzed again. "Perfect," he said and checked his next message. "They just won't give me a break, will they? Not that I mind anymore. I seem to enjoy what I do now. It makes a difference when you actually care. Did you know I went on a medical mission trip to Guatemala last December? Your wife and Laura went. It's a good thing

your wife speaks Spanish. I'm sure you know this, but she gave birth to little Jake a week ago. He's doing great. Looks just like you, poor guy."

His pager went off again. "Alright, alright," he said and reached down to silence the pager. "I gotta go. Tell Eleazar hello. When I get up there we'll do lunch." A strong gust blew in as Todd turned toward his car, whipping noisily at his ears. When the wind died down, he tilted his head, listening. He could have sworn he heard music. Like someone was singing. It almost sounded like Jake.

Nothing surprised him anymore. He shrugged it off and went on his way.

The End