



THE  
CHRIST  
REPORT

*A Novel*

Author of the *New York Times* Bestseller  
*The Last Valentine*

JAMES MICHAEL  
PRATT

# THE CHRIST REPORT

A Novel From

Bestselling Author

JAMES MICHAEL PRATT

*Author of the HALLMARK HALL of FAME Book to Film Sensation*

# THE LOST VALENTINE

# THE CHRIST REPORT

by

James Michael Pratt

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*~A Story of Love, Faith, and Redemption~*

### The Holy Birth

*And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem-- to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child....*

*And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them at the inn. ~Gospel of Luke: Chapter 2, KJV*

### Easter Morning

*And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus...and they talked together of all these things which had happened. And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.*

*And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?*

*And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem?*

*And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us, for the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them. ~Gospel of Luke: Chapter 24 – KJV*

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## PROLOGUE

Caesarea, Palestine, 69 CE

The Legions of Rome disembarked from their ships at the Port of Caesarea for the past month. Tonight they marched through the streets in an unending display of power toward the Galilee and also defiant Jerusalem. The grizzled and time-worn retired legionnaire looked on through curtains carefully drawn to obscure the single light coming from the oil lamp in the back room, where he was carefully applying ink to scrolls as final words meant for disciples of a future era.

Everyone's nerves were on edge. Political and nationalistic intrigue had gripped Palestine for five years and especially since the death of the infamous Nero the year before. The insane and licentious Nero, who had openly celebrated the murder of Christians for sport, was said to be fiddling as Rome burned. But the old man could not be certain of fact from fiction. All he knew was that he and others were in extreme peril as Jew and Christian alike celebrated Nero's death and threatened the Roman rule of their land.

Rome had gone through four emperors in one year since Nero's final breath. Looking for stability after insanity, Vespasian, the current Emperor and fifth since Nero, had a point to make to prove who he was. The Zealots, aligned with some of the ruling Jews, were no friends to the Christians, but their true enemy was Rome. Yet the Christians had been added to Rome's latest suspects in this treason. The Zealots thought the disarray in Roman politics following Nero's murder was their time to finally strike out in a bid for Judean independence.

The few remaining disciples—and those with sympathies toward them—were not deemed safe; not even he, a former Centurion of Rome with a history in the land dating back forty years. He understood the urgency of his final actions in life, as the Judean world he once knew would soon be turned to rubble by the merciless Vespasian.

Now the much venerated, but aged Roman, took a parchment, and by candlelight inked the words of his final communication to encourage a future messenger of the faithful. It was to accompany two cedar tablets of a sacred history wrapped in woolen fleece for safe keeping. He would bury them in a stone box in his olive orchard, hoping that their retrieval would be accompanied by divine guidance in a future time. Though his weariness showed, his writing hand was steady. Reading aloud, he began one final review before hiding the scrolls and wood plaques:

*I am Simon Cornelius of the house of Lucius Cornelius Lentulus, past Senator and Consul of Rome. An Iberian by birth, I was adopted by the Senator and trained in the arts of combat to arrive at the final post of my life as a Centurion in Palestine. Orphaned by war, it is irony that also made me a soldier, and fate that set my feet on a path to a different kind of warfare than Rome trained me for. Centurion by rank, I became a friend to the disciples by choice, and also a message-carrier for them.*

*This notation shall become hidden with the time-worn cedar tablets, inscribed with comforting words meant for sojourners of a now empty inn found near Jerusalem and also the most special plaque of which I need not describe at this time.*

*Whether it is the words, or the man who etched them that made the first tablet so precious to the Innkeeper, I know not. I am simply the envoy entrusted to pass this token on to one who will announce the Innkeeper's message to the world at a future time of desperate need. As to the second, it is the most treasured of possessions. Its destiny has not been vouchsafed to me.*

*Now I must keep my promise to the Innkeeper, one I have walked a*



sacred road with. He requires a report be made of his devotion to the Master and has entrusted me with the Aramaic inscribed plaque found above the lintel of the entry door. Its meaning will be made available to you by a ready writer for God.

Now I must bid farewell. My lonely journey has come to a close and the rest of eternity beckons my broken heart. I soon shall join my beloved Rebekah of Tyre. I am in danger and a wanderer among strangers now, even though they be countrymen. But I came to know my truer identity in a manner undeniable on a days of days from a King of Kings.

I wish the same good fortune that fell upon my soul on a Road to an inn outside of Jerusalem descend upon the reader's heart. I close for now to hide up these and other words with these two cedar tablets. May my King, to whom my knee bends and head still bows, speed your journey to know this:

*As it was for us on the road to Emmaus, so may it be with you!*

~ The Friend

Sam Robertson Live Christmas Special

The crew Christmas party would take place after this recorded “Christmas Special,” the final *Sam Robertson Live Reports* of his career. Everyone knew what Sam Robertson had just gone through, and now this show was truly one for the books. It would air on Christmas Eve, at which time Sam would be “Live” to introduce and do his final “sign off” of his career.

The host was literally a walking miracle. Just weeks before, his chance of living seemed less than 50/50, and now he appeared on camera more alive than many had ever remembered him to look for years.

“I’ve never seen Sam look so at peace and happy to be in front of the cameras in all my twenty-five years of working with him,” program producer Mary Bentley posed.

“Retirement suits him. It has been a long time coming for Mr. Robertson,” assistant producer Larry McGarr whispered back. “What’s the big deal with this final show?”

“He wouldn’t say, just that it was the show of a lifetime and he’d be lucky to fit everything in to a one-hour taping,” Mary answered.

Larry held up his hand for the countdown as he stood beside camera #1 and spoke into the microphone. “Ten seconds, Mr. Robertson.”

Sam just nodded and looked intently into the camera lens as the clock wound down and Larry pointed his “On Air” signal to Sam.

“Good evening, America, and friends from around the globe! After twenty-five years of doing the ‘*Sam Robertson Live Christmas Special*,’ this one will be our last. And what a show I hope it will be!

“Last year at this time I suffered a near fatal heart attack, and in fact was in a coma for several days. What happened to me in that state of post-surgery sleep was the most blessed of all things; I was given a second chance. But there was something else...”

Sam looked down and shook his head quickly from side to side as if trying to shake a thought loose. He then resumed:

“There is a natural season for all things to begin and to end. Now this joyride in journalism of forty years must turn a page to family life, and to enjoying whatever days God may yet have in store for me. And...” Sam stopped again, and looked down at the notes before him as he cleared his throat.

Larry looked over to Mary and mouthed, “What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” she mouthed back.

“Is he okay?” Larry asked.

Mary spoke into Sam’s earpiece. “Sam if you can hear me and everything is under control, tap your fingers on the desk.”

Sam obeyed.

Mary looked at the crew and gave the hand signal to keep rolling.

Pinching moisture away from his eyes, Sam did his best to resume the stoic public storytelling persona he was known as. He finally looked up into camera #2 and smiled, then said,

“...and now I will share a sacred story of the greatest interview *never* told. I hope you will stay with me for this hour. We’ll be right back after this message from our sponsors.”

Mary cued the cameramen for a pause.

“Mary,” Sam interjected, “should we reshoot from the beginning?”

“How do you feel Sam?”

“A bit emotional,” he answered.

“Do you think that’s going to change, this being the final show of your life?”

Sam stopped, pondered upon what Mary was saying and knew the truth. “No, I’m pretty emotional about this story and this final Christmas Special.”

“Then let’s go for it!” she answered.

Sam smiled, nodded, and said, “You know how much I trust you, don’t you Mary?”

Then it hit suddenly. *This is my last show too!* Her face flushed crimson and her eyes watered. “Now see what you made me do?”

Sam chuckled, and it seemed to relax them both. “Ready when you are,” he gently said, quickly taking a sip from the bottled water he always kept on hand.

Larry stood once again by camera #1 and gave his countdown finally pointing to Sam as he

mouthed, “You’re on!”

Sam started calmly without prompts or notes:

“Welcome back. I am so glad you are joining us for our *Christmas Special* I call ‘*The Greatest Story Never Told.*’ The road to this story began when I collapsed from a sudden heart attack in New York City last year.

“As doctors frantically fought for me upon a surgical table, my good wife prayed for my soul. Whatever it was I experienced in the anesthesia-induced sleep after transforming heart surgery, has also transformed my mind.”

Mary studied Sam carefully as he spoke. He was speaking clearly and with a happiness and eloquence now unprompted by notes. She smiled as Sam turned to camera #2 with the smoothness of a consummate professional.

“I was an unbeliever in anything related to something the classic faith film from 1965 celebrated, titled: *The Greatest Story Ever Told.*

“But what if I told you that during my surgically caused sleep a little-known epilogue to the Christmas and Easter story—one that has been overlooked by most readers of the biblical tale—was played out in the recovery room? And what if that epilogue carried with it a secret which two men—one a simple innkeeper and the other a Roman Centurion—tried to make known to the world 2,000 years ago?

“The Victorian era poet William Wordsworth reminded me of a sacred place where truth is sometimes revealed. He said of a place the mind and spirit of man sometimes visits:”

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth and every common sight, to me did seem—  
Appareled in celestial light, the glory and freshness of a dream,*

*It is now as it hath been of yore—  
Turn wheresoever I may, by night or day—  
The things which I have seen, I now can see no more...*

*Whither is fled the visionary gleam—  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

“Wadsworth echoed what I had experienced during my anesthetized recovery as my life hung somewhere between life and death. What seemed to me a dream, I reveal to you now.”

Sam paused once more. Mary once again became a little nervous, but Sam, just looking deep into the desk and notes before him, fought back the emotion gripping his throat and then beat Mary to the punch by tapping gently upon the table to let her know everything was under control. Then as if he were part of a story, he developed the set-up:

“Just over 2,000 years ago,” Sam continued, “during the reign of Emperor Augustus Caesar of Rome, a worldwide tax required everyone in the Roman occupied lands to report to their towns of birth for an official census.

“There were many roads leading in and out of the city of Jerusalem. One led from a village called Emmaus, and another led to the town of Bethlehem. As if I were an actor in the great drama, I came to know an innkeeper by the name of Cleopas.

“I will now take you on the same journey I took in a nether world between the living and the dead, where time stood still for me. I thought I saw Bethlehem of Judea on the eve of the Roman Emperor’s mandated tax census, and...”

For the next hour Sam Robertson offered a tale as if it were a first-person account. His privately named story for his *Christmas Special* and final show of his talk-show life—would become known by the production staff and loyal worldwide audience as, “THE CHRIST REPORT!”

## THE INNKEEPER

Bethlehem – Eve of the Roman Tax Census, 1 BC

“More wine. And more loaves!” growled a legionnaire.

“See to it, Phinnias,” the innkeeper whispered.

“Yes, Master Cleopas.”

The usual mix at occasions of celebration and feasts in the land roundabout Jerusalem brought all sorts to this place. This night was no exception. The inn had filled to the brim with road-weary guests. Now the Emperor’s edict, the Roman tax census, had brought thousands of additional visitors. The young innkeeper gazed across the raucous dining hall, filled beyond capacity. The required reporting of each head of house to his hometown or village of birth had made the inn of Cleopas at Bethlehem, not many furlongs from mighty Jerusalem itself, to nearly burst at the seams with all-night boarders.

“The fool thinks this is old wine. See how he pretends at drunkenness,” Phinnias whispered into the ear of the server boy Asa, peering out over the sea of gruff legionnaires. The youth nodded and hurried past him with fresh loaves for each table.

People Cleopas had never seen before were swarming to Bethlehem to be counted. In fact, on the morrow, he himself would venture to Emmaus, the place of his own birth some three-score furlongs from the capital city in the opposite direction, where he would be tallied and made to pay the tax of a single man. Then, hurrying back once more, he would manage the crowds.

He longed to stay in Emmaus—to, alas, be with her—but this throng promised to fill his purse. And revenue was much needed at the time. The guests packed into his dining hall and small inn eagerly relaxed their purse strings as they merrily consumed more wine, ate more victuals. Cleopas’s job was to continue to stir up that merriment, to keep it going strong late into the evening. Soon he would have the dowry required by Jarom to ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage. The sound of payment for his services in coins of copper, silver, and gold, made the weariness of this night more bearable. He would rather be in Emmaus now, with her, but for this.

Yet another worry bore heavily on the innkeeper’s youthful shoulders this night: Jarom, his future father-in-law, would be arriving at the inn any minute. Would he measure up to the man’s expectations? He had already proven adept at turning a copper penny into a good shekel.

Yet his lack of experience and firsthand knowledge of finance, of running such an elaborate establishment, was still very limited.

Barely twenty years-old, and recently inheriting this inn and boarding house from his uncle Simeon, Cleopas had never before been subject to such harsh demands. Like a father, Simeon had brought him up to learn a trade and be an observant Jew, quick to obey all the laws of the prophets. Although originally from the smaller Emmaus, Simeon had brought young Cleopas to Bethlehem after the death of the boy's parents.

From his eighth year the lad had worked at the inn, attended school, made his offerings, and observed the Sabbath. So close to Jerusalem, Cleopas—to Simeon's delight and regret alike—also had picked up on the varied cosmopolitan pretenses of travelers who stopped for refreshment on their way to the cities and coasts of other lands.

Cleopas, for instance, had mastered the diplomatic art of the smile, and of compromise. *The patron is always right*, Simeon often reminded him. *Satisfy thy guest, and thy purse shall never be empty*, was another favorite aphorism. And Cleopas had found in it much wisdom. And so it was that he carried on in Simeon's wise traditions.

Cleopas had proven shrewd for business, which pleased Simeon greatly. On several occasions before his death, the frail old man had put the duties of his entire hospitality enterprise atop the bony back of his young nephew. Cleopas, in turn, had never let him down. Simeon's wife had died of the fever years before, and, childless, Simeon's last wish was for Cleopas to inherit the inn. With his dying breath he had uttered: *"Remember, my son, there is always room at the inn for the least to the greatest. Walk with God. Peace be unto you, my son."*

So here he was, now; callow, on his own, yet having sworn to make this property even more prosperous, more famous for service than his well-respected Uncle Simeon had.

"More wine, I say! Innkeeper! The loaves! Where in the name of Jupiter, Zeus, and...and..." The unruly legionnaire turned to a fellow soldier, now pretending to be too drunk to know the difference between the question and the answer. "What is...what *is* the Hebrews' name for their God?" The stammering soldier snickered to his company of friends, as if he'd just imparted the wittiest joke ever invented. Then, his comrades having shrugged off the babbled query, he bellowed his question to the roomful of guests. "WHO IS THE HEBREW GOD!"

No answer. The hall went silent as the diners pondered what injury the irrational man might do with his sword.

“No matter,” he cackled loudly. “Bring the meats!” He slammed his fist down on the table and slumped back in his seat, sputtering a ribald string of harmless epithets in his native tongue.

“Soldiers,” Cleopas muttered with disdain. But not just any soldiers. These were the most despised of the Roman Legion - Provincials. And they were late. Their custom was to set out for the Fortress Antonia at dusk. Perhaps they were camping in the fields this night, in anticipation of manning the census tables on the morrow. *Perhaps*, Cleopas grumbled.

You could never tell, though, about the occupiers. Uncertainty was one thing he, Cleopas, had come to count on. And these were of the crude Syrian band of legionnaires. Conscripts and no lovers of the Jews. Even if the Roman considered the Jew as a mere conquered people, conflict between the crass Syrians from the north and the Jews from the land of Israel went back many generations; blood, wars and strife had long cemented them as bitter enemies.

Now, however, both Syrian and Israelite alike were under Roman dominion. But each two nations regarded its captor from a differing viewpoint. On the one hand, the Jew only sought to free himself from cruelty and servitude; the Syrian, on the other hand, gladly picked up the sword for the Roman Legions, eagerly took his pay, a fine uniform, and respect as a fellow conqueror - occasionally making good on the opportunity to kill a Jew. In a word, the Syrian joined in the ruthless game; the Jew picked up the sword for no conqueror. This Syrian sort was the most vulgar guest Cleopas had known for many months; he was also the most prone to violence.

Cleopas knew he must attend to this one, or the entire room of guests would know the Syrian’s searing wrath.

“Now!” he barked again, pounding his fist even harder against the tabletop’s long, wooden planks.

“Coming, sir! Yes, sir! Bringing a fresh loaf, a warm loaf, direct from the hearth,” Cleopas called out. “The best loaf and the finest wine! Be assured, sir, I want only the best for you!”

The room grew deathly still: no rattling of a dish, nary a cough, no one dared breathe. All eyes were fastened upon the gruff, red-faced Syrian. The fate of every diner and boarder of this cozy hall rested upon the outcome of this bristling madman.



After several tense moments, the slovenly soldier hunched slightly forward, picked up a napkin, and dabbed at the corner of his mouth—now dripping with the last ounce of wine from his cup—and stuffed it with the last morsels of meat on his plate. He let out a drunken groan, as the soldier next to him spoke in the foreign tongue. Then they both chuckled. A snarl, a wave for the boy to hurry, and a look of contempt for this crowd was the answer from the troublemaker.

“Take this wine, take this bread, and satisfy the dogs,” Cleopas whispered to Phinnias. “Do not be far from them. Be there when the Syrian pig grunts, mutters any word of aggravation. This busiest of nights, the gifts left upon the tables after the meal, our very reputation...all depend upon the satisfaction of these barbarians. We must ensure that their evening is warm and filling.” Cleopas’s eyes darted about the hall. He nodded at the mass of humanity filling the room, the average citizen maintaining cautious distance between himself and the body of soldiers. “Look at them. They are as eager as you and I to make sure these barbarians, these uncircumcised curs, are well attended to.”

Phinnias nodded. Cleopas shook his head, trying to jolt away the sleepiness weighing him down. He could hardly keep his eyes from drooping shut. Even his smile was losing its edge; his act, his well-practiced, happy-host, glad-to-be-a-servant-to-all manner was flagging badly. He had but three hours’ sleep the night before, arising early to go to market and start the cooking fires in the hearths pegged alongside the sleeping quarters.

Cleopas gazed up at the rows of Hebrew words carved in a horizontal piece of wood hung above the inn’s door. There on the white fir plank brought from a forest in Lebanon, was written the summation of a significant story.

It had taken place years ago. A gracious, youthful family—kin to Simeon, father and son, former Bethlehem residents but now carpenters from upper Galilee—they had not only repaired tables and chairs to pay for their room and board during Passover, but had carved the wooden plaque as a gesture of gratitude. Simeon had cherished the simple gift ever since, declaring that it should hang there forever so that whenever a boarder came or went through the door, he or she would be compelled to read it.

Cleopas had been a table boy, a server, one week into his eighth year from the time he had first been brought to the inn. Distant cousins of Simeon, the man and his son had made the pilgrimage at the Passover in the year the boy, Joseph, had become a man.

Cleopas recalled watching as Joseph carefully chiseled the words into the soft rectangular

piece of wood. Joseph was the son of Jacob, also a carpenter. This Joseph now would be four years older than Cleopas.

Simeon cherished these words from the Koheleth—words from he who sacred test simply called “the Preacher.” Cleopas strained to read them with tired eyes.

*Go thy way-eat and drink with Joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God now  
accepteth thy works. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest,  
for that is thy portion in this life.*

Cleopas wasn't sure if God accepted his works or not, but he was sure that his inn, situated on the road leading into and through Bethlehem, would be the inn of choice for many a weary traveler. This establishment would likewise provide for his future bride, Mary, daughter of Jarom of Emmaus, a fellow innkeeper and a first cousin to Uncle Simeon.

Cleopas had long loved the slender, comely young lady. Flaxen, her crown was made of soft, silken braids with tresses so fine, falling loosely upon delicate shoulders, as if to accentuate the sculpted beauty of the face one would expect of a princess. Wispy locks with a hint of crimson, they seemed willing to fly free in the stirrings of a soft spring breeze, in perfect harmony with the cheerful songs that so effortlessly fell from her lips. Every mannerism, every thread of her earthy beauty beckoned him, called to him to touch... Still, Cleopas could not. Not as yet.

He yearned for the girl, now a woman of legal marrying age. He pictured her eyes, those extraordinarily remarkable eyes. Deep tint of olive, innocence gazed out from eyes filled with light. Fair skin, soft skin, in need of tender care, rivaled the alabaster radiance of an angel. He longed to hold her hand in his, sit and marvel at the woman who would bare him sons and daughters.

A living gem, Mary was granted these rare refinements and qualities by the very God of Israel; He seemed to have touched her, making her every feature and attribute stand out for him, Cleopas, to see and love. *Mary*...the sound of the name thrilled him. Mary was the morning sun, bright, full of shimmer and shine, a sparkle to please those who came near. “Dear Mary,” he breathed, unaware of his daydreaming solitude. “I must have her,” he mouthed to himself, voicelessly adding, “and soon.”

But first he must prove himself to Jarom, a rather stubborn man who no doubt would demand proof that the youthful innkeeper was capable of the task Simeon had left to him.

“The door, Asa!” commanded Cleopas, awakened from his reverie by the urgent pounding. “If it be Jarom, usher him quietly and without hesitation to the quarters reserved for him. “But,” he quickly warned the youth, “there is no room tonight at this inn for anyone else! Tell them there are victuals, but they must eat outside. No room! Make it clear, Asa!”

Cleopas hastened to the kitchen to see if the porridge was ready for the kettle, the mutton for the skewer. Any night but this one he would gladly accept another boarder.

Unbeknownst to anyone but he, Cleopas had, in fact, reserved one single room for some special guest that might happen by. It was his newest and best suite, fit for the High Priest, or a Roman Tribune. With all new furnishings, it was fitted with an ample basin for bathing, alongside urns of fresh water from the deep well for drinking. A commodious bed, fit for a king, with posts of cedar and side rails as well, graced one wall. Lambs’ wool—not straw, but thick pads of fleece—made up the forgiving bedding, allowing a traveler’s road-weary body to find its most satisfying slumber.

The room was spacious, nearly one-half the size of the dining hall. And two separate chambers resided on either side of the main room. His dear Mary and their children would one day occupy these fine dwellings.

And something else the largest of these rooms possessed, which no ordinary home in Bethlehem could boast: a window with glass! The only room to let in the light of the mighty city, God’s City, bathed in the brilliance of the nearby temple and its golden fiery dome. The glory of God resting there, in such plain sight, would always remind them of their eternal love.

Squinting through the fiery, molded silica, one could behold nearly the entire panorama. The window had been a gift from an artisan whose glass-blowing craft was prized throughout finer homes in Jerusalem.

The man was from the Far East and occasionally traveled with the caravans of his friend Artemaus, who, when passing this way, often camped his people in the hilly fields skirting Bethlehem. But during his sojourn in the land roundabout Jerusalem, most often he came to reside at Cleopas’s inn.

Cleopas had just that very week finished furnishing these rooms. *Chambers for a Prince*, he was sure. Jarom would be pleased and would be the first to occupy this room. He would

understand how special his daughter, Mary, was to him. And the master chamber would be her room one day - his Mary's room. He would serve her every want, her every whim. This night would prove to Jarom, her father, that he Cleopas, would indeed make his daughter a suitable husband.

Cleopas paced back and forth, nearly working a path into the wooden floor. So much was riding on the events of the next few hours. A half-day's ride upon donkey, a full-day's walk from Emmaus, Jarom would arrive exhausted, for he would have suffered the same vagaries of this Roman edict: the Jews of Israel were to return to their place of birth to be numbered. So Jarom - surely to be followed the next morning by his family; for they too, had been ordered to appear for the census and should be here at any moment.

"Master Cleopas," Asa said, handing him a message. "From Jarom."

Cleopas excitedly unfolded the small parchment and read the few scrawled words. Then he read them again, a pall of disappointment creasing his face. "He's not coming. The morrow will see him by last hour, before twilight. He will come with his family to do his reporting for the census, then return straightway. He cannot stay," Cleopas sighed.

"Master, what does it mean?" Asa ventured, knowing full well the anxiety Cleopas had suffered this night. Asa was but five years younger than his master, an apprentice lad without family, and so what might affect this business and the life of Cleopas had a direct effect upon him as well.

"No need for worry, Asa. See the man there - the smartly dressed one? Notice his robes and the delicate, refined lady?"

"Yes, Master."

"Make inquiries of him. He dresses after the manner of the publicans... a lawyer, perhaps. Inquire whether he is staying in Bethlehem for the tax reporting, and if he should need a room. I may as well profit from this. Hurry, go!"

Cleopas could make quite a sum for the single, elegantly adorned room he had reserved for Jarom; as much as he made on all ten of the sleeping rooms together. He nervously looked on as Asa described the amenities. The ornately clothed man smiled, then arose, speaking softly to his female companion.

*Husband and wife, Cleopas reasoned. They are reporting for the census, no doubt.*

*Possibly from the Roman port of Caesarea; used to the finest in accommodations. They probably share some cramped, drab room with mother and father here in town. We'll see,* he thought as he watched Asa part the curtain leading to the suite. *Good. They will not be able to resist.* Cleopas urged Asa on with a flick of his hand. Asa nodded in obedience.

A few tense moments lapsed. *Asa should be back by now,* the innkeeper said to himself. He resumed his pacing, eyeing, as was his habit, the servers filling the needs of his other guests, listening to the rhythmic clanging of pots, dishes, goblets, amid the din of conversation and bawdy prattle of the Syrians. Across the hall he spotted Phinnias, attending to their whims; the mass of merchants and regular diners feasting at the tables...all gave off the sounds of money being made, and Cleopas was addicted to that sound.

A knock came at the door.

“Phinnias!” Cleopas called out to the table waiter, urgently pointing to the door.

Phinnias shrugged, his hands filled with an assortment of platters and plates. To make matters worse, the same Syrian soldier was once again hammering the table with his fists, berating the exasperated waiter while his companions laughed and jeered. Cleopas only could wag his head, signaling that he understood Phinnias’s dilemma. He had to tend to the rantings of the barbarian.

“Oh, stop. Yes, yes, I’m coming!” he shouted. He could barely hear himself over the cries of the boisterous crowd. The noise, laughter, and raucous behavior of both soldier and citizen, all only seemed amplified the more wine was poured.

Cleopas unlatched the thick, wooden door and swung it open. The man outside dressed in rough, homespun tunic, appealed to him with an expression of panic and hurried speech. Cleopas sensed the fear and desperation in this man’s eyes, knowing what he would have to say. Still, he let him go on.

“Sir, I beseech you. This is our third stop of the evening. My wife is with child. Is Simeon in? Can I speak to him?”

“You know Simeon?”

“I have not seen him for many years. But I once stayed here with my father, the year I reported to the temple and became a man.”

“I am Cleopas. Simeon is with God - just one year ago now. Simeon was my uncle. I

came to dwell with him in my eighth year.”

“Then you are kin,” the tired man sighed, relaxing a bit. “You are the serving lad I remember,” he added. “But such a fine man now. I am Joseph ben Jacob, here to report for the census. This is my wife Mary and...”

Cleopas forced a smile, then held up his hand, a gesture meant to halt the man’s feeble pleadings. The innkeeper realized his only available room was a costly one, being admired even at this very moment by one who would pay a small fortune—a king’s ransom—to take proper care of the lovely lady at the table.

Joseph, his weight nervously shifting from one foot to the other, resumed his entreaty. “Can you spare a room for one night? We can pay. I am from Galilee and she cannot ride another furlong. We must find a room and a midwife. Kind sir...dare I say kin? I don’t know what to do.”

“I -” Cleopas stumbled.

Joseph struggled in search of his purse. “I have...”

Cleopas once more raised his hand to calm the man, then turned to see Asa, nodding. *Good. Now I can honestly tell this man there is no room here.* Cleopas restated his refusal with mild tones, apologetic words.

The man, however, would have none of it. “But she is giving birth. Please, sir. You are kin of Simeon. We have no other family here. I must find shelter without delay. Simeon surely would not have...”

“Friend! I will not stand here and have you invoke the sentiments I have for my deceased uncle, sentiments close to my heart,” replied Cleopas, pounding a closed fist upon his chest for emphasis. “As I said, there is no room at this inn this night. Look for yourself.” He stepped back and held the door open wide.

Cleopas nodded toward the finely dressed lawyer and his lady. The lawyer held out his hand and his wife reached up. He whispered something that pleased her greatly, and then with Asa leading the way, entered beyond the curtain separating the dining hall from the sleeping quarters.

The hall itself was lined with tables, surrounded by loud diners and hired servers frantically trying to keep goblets filled, while delivering bowls hot with soups and stews of

mutton.

“Sir...” the voice of the man choked. “Mary cannot ride another minute. See her pain.” He motioned toward the woman. “Give us a place outside the kitchen, anywhere...please...”

Cleopas, for the first time, glanced over at the pain-faced figure atop the donkey. “Mary?” he asked. *I have a Mary*, he thought. She was to be here in the morning. “Mary, you say?”

“Yes. Mary, my wife. She is young. I must attend to her needs with dignity and...”

Cleopas’s compassion at last began to conquer his reason. Perhaps he could let them have *his* room. Then he thought: *No, I must be here for the lawyer now; nearby to attend to his needs, coax more for the service I will provide. I cannot...*

He himself had slept in the stable on more than one occasion. The straw was clean. He was a man who would rent his own room for that extra shekel, that single blessed coin which would bring him closer to his aim of providing Jarom of Emmaus with a proper dowry to win the hand of his daughter.

*Mary*, he thought.

“Sir, look above your door,” Joseph pointed. “I hung it there myself.”

The desperate man’s words shook Cleopas from his mental wanderings. He stood back and read the hand-carved sign that Simeon had insisted remain in place forever.

“It is rented,” Asa whispered in Cleopas’s ear. “And for twice the asking price,” he added, a trace of pride in his voice. “Master, there is no room,” Asa reminded him, noting his master’s silent, stupor-like reverie; considering the desperate couple, with the door still ajar...

“Shut the door, Innkeeper!” growled the Syrian. “Are you a fool? I said -”

But Cleopas wasn’t listening. He was in that oblivious mind-space where people go sometimes—the narrow corridor of consciousness—a place where memories remind one of similar times and their outcomes. *What would Simeon do? Give up his room?* He considered what that meant. *How many days?* Simeon was kin. *That makes me kin*, he reminded himself.

*I am a businessman, not a charity*, he counseled himself. He pictured the woman he loved, then his gaze once more swung back to the weeping woman seated upon the donkey. “Asa,” he mumbled under his breath, “take care of this place. I am going to the stable. Send one of the servers for the midwife Anna. Have her come to the stable immediately. Have the server

then bring, water, cloth, and bedding; any extra bedding from storage.”

“But Cleopas, Master, I -”

“Asa! Do as I say, now!”

The boy nodded and retreated.

“Come,” Cleopas urged, and reached for the arm of the man. “I have shelter to give you without cost. There is clean straw and I am ordering adequate bedding for you.”

The Galilean replied gratefully, blessing the name of Simeon, Cleopas and all his household as he led the animal with his quietly sobbing wife away from the boarding house.

*Joseph ben Jacob of Nazareth. Well...*

He knew Simeon would have wanted him to keep peace at the inn. And, under ordinary circumstances—not these pressures of the Roman census—he would have found some accommodation, even if it were his own living quarters. *But this is no ordinary night*, he whispered to himself.



## SAM ROBERTSON REPORTS

Last Year – Studio of *Sam Robertson Live*, New York City

“From his studios in New York City, comes another *Special Sam Robertson LIVE!* the announcer bellowed the signature intro and cued camera 1.

“Welcome Cardinal McIntyre,” Sam began.

“So happy to be with you, Samuel,” The Catholic archbishop, and recently ordained a Cardinal, answered.

Sam posed his first question directly. “What would you consider the most important event in all of world history?” Sam Robertson asked.

“Two days must vie equally as the greatest. Christmas, the day the Son of God took a mortal body, and of course the day he reclaimed it, that day of the immortal resurrection known as Easter morn,” answered Cardinal McIntyre, a special Vatican guest to the nightly talk show.

Robertson nodded. “Let us, then, agree that the man Jesus of Nazareth was born of Mary at Bethlehem. And let us also agree that he has been and is worshipped by many as the Son of God. Historically, the evidence and witnesses weigh heavily in favor of the biblical account of his birth, his life, and what his admirers thought of him. And excuse me if I play the devil’s advocate here, Cardinal, but why do you feel that Easter should be considered one of the two greatest historical events? After all, there is no hard proof that a literal resurrection actually took place, just hearsay witnesses some two thousand years dead...if they even existed then,” Sam hinted with smug cynicism.

Robertson’s religious guest avoided the bait thrown his way, responding, “Two witnesses in any court of law make a compelling case. We have dozens of witnesses who saw him after he arose from the dead.” The Cardinal smiled politely, letting his words sink in a bit. “That being

the case, the hope of immortality which Easter morn represents makes it, in my view, the single most important day and event in world history, along with the Lord's birth."

"Well, until I interview God himself, I'm afraid I'm not swayed."

Sam had found himself blurting out the words before he could weigh the impact such a statement might have on his guest and the viewing public. "After all," he plowed ahead, "wouldn't it be more practical to consider the harnessing of electricity, providing light to the world, or something tangible, something that's done so much good, as one of the world's greatest events or achievements? I mean, look at that. In a mere one hundred years of the incandescent light bulb, we have achieved more advances in all areas of technology than the previous six thousand years combined! With all due respect, of course."

"Of course," Cardinal McIntyre nodded, his face tightening into a near-sowl. "And more killing, destruction, and sorrow. Harnessing energy, providing light to the world, is a poor substitute for he who *is* the *Light of the World*, Sam." Then he extended his hand across the interview table and said, "It's been a privilege to be with you this evening."

Somewhat stunned that the Cardinal had abruptly terminated the interview several minutes short, Sam accepted the proffered hand, smiled, and turned to camera 2. "This concludes our weeklong visit with guests representing major religious denominations, this, the final week of November." Then he turned one last time to his guest and added, "Cardinal McIntyre, it has been an honor having you with us. May you have a very special Christmas - and please give my regards to his Excellency, the Pope." That said, he turned to face camera 1.

"I will be taking next week, Thanksgiving week, off to celebrate a very special event with my wife. I hope you'll join our guest hosts, some of Hollywood's elite.

"May your family enjoy the coming National Day of Gratitude, Thanksgiving Day, with safety and love. From all here at *The Sam Robertson Report*, good evening, and God bless."

The red light blinked off and both figures sagged back into their seats.

"You say 'God bless' like you mean it," Cardinal McIntyre remarked, now they were off the air. "You do fear God, don't you, Samuel?"

Robertson was taken aback. No one called him *Samuel* anymore. "I do not fear what I

cannot see. Of course, if there is a God,” he shrugged, I would fear him... I guess,” he added with a laugh.

“Fear can be healthy,” the Cardinal interjected. “It can provide motivation to find him.”

“Fears are not convenient, your Grace. They make you think of unpleasant things, things that belong to the dead and the damned.”

“Samuel,” the Cardinal sighed, not unkindly. “You are forgetting his other words: *Peace I give you, my peace I leave with you. Let not your heart be troubled neither let it be afraid.*”

Robertson wrinkled the bridge of his nose as if to ward off some awful stench. “I’ve got everything I ever wanted. No troubled heart here,” he said, thumping his chest.

“You do not understand the wholeness that true peace offers. I will pray for you.” The tinge of a smile crossed the Cardinal’s lips.

“That is an offer I will not refuse, your Grace. By the way...I was a bit shocked that you signed us off like that, cutting the interview short. I’m used to being in control. But I admire that,” he said, grinning in return. “May I ask why you ended our interview early?”

“I never debate reality. I merely state it,” he answered.

“I’ve offended you?”

“No. But I will not be put on the defensive. You must learn who is really in control. I just thought I’d offer a small lesson,” the Cardinal said, his smile widening.

“You feel it was sacrilegious of me to state my skepticism?”

“No, everyone is entitled to their beliefs. Rest assured, my good friend, that God knows you, and one day there shall be an interview with him. When that will be and who will interview who is the question.”

“I respect that, sir. I would love to be sure of what you call *reality*. Seeing is believing, as they say.”

“No, Samuel. Faith is not stirred from seeing, but here.” The Cardinal lightly patted the space over his heart.

“Sam,” he started again, “why don’t you join us for a special Nativity celebration in Rome. I would be happy to make the arrangements. This year’s sacred festivity promises to be exceptional.”

“Thank you for the offer, Cardinal McIntyre. I’m honored. But I have an *exceptional*

Christmas celebration of my own planned. I've been married one year now and we'll be spending our first Christmas together in seclusion — and being a little stingy, I guess. Joy's college-age son will be at the grandparents' place. So, it'll be just the two of us — definitely a *no-room-at-the-inn* style celebration.”

“Well, in that case, may I offer you my blessing for a long and happy life together,” the Catholic Father offered in parting.

“Thank you. I need all the help I can get.”

...

Down deep, Sam Robertson, the Jersey-born-and-bred host of the nightly interview show, knew there wasn't much left in him. He'd suffered two minor and one major heart attack over the past fifteen years, and had undergone double bypass surgery ten years ago.

His had been a hard life, and he supposed there was no one to blame but himself for the condition his old ticker was in. For years he'd resorted to alcohol, partying, and any type of cover-up to mask the broken heart. Sam could hardly complete the thought, one that had ricocheted around in his head all these years. For so long he'd struggled to find the *right* one, the woman who would complete him, make him whole, to no avail. He imagined that a broken spirit had given him ample justification to be hard on his body over the years.

As far as the broadcast world went, there wasn't much left for him to do, unless — as he jokingly told a former colleague from CNBC, and now Cardinal McIntyre as well — he was to land an interview with God himself.

A wearisome, fast-paced forty years of television journalism — beginning with the 1979 Iran hostage crisis coverage as a cub reporter had taken a terrible toll on his health, not to mention on his relationships.

Now, with a worldwide adoring audience, Sam couldn't really be sure who truly cared about him, or why. *Was it his fame, notoriety, money?* He had asked himself that question a thousand times, particularly each time he met an attractive woman who showed any sign of interest in him.

Three failed marriages and six grown children later, Sam had finally met the girl of his

dreams, Joy Adams, though he wondered if she could ever love a man with so many miles on him. Why should she care at all for him? Was it the money?

Or maybe it was his charm. But with all the young, hunky, wavy-haired smooth-talkers in the business, why should she choose him? Thousands of interviews had left his face with a world-weary, drawn, careworn look, far from the chiseled features he once had. *Yeah, it had to be the money.*

Millions of dollars per year in salary and nearly a dozen commercial endorsements—from milk to therapeutic mattresses—had set him up for life. He couldn't spend it fast enough, even after his ex-wives got theirs.

Joy was everything all the other women had been, and more. She possessed something discernibly different, a class and character that made her stand above the others. She lit up a room. He noticed it from the first time they met at a dinner reception in downtown Manhattan's Ritz Carlton. The reception had been in honor of Terry Werner, a CNTV reporter who, after two years of being held hostage in Mogadishu, had been freed during a firefight between warring Somali clans and turned over to a negotiator from the U.N.

Joy was indeed different. Right from the start she'd treated him with courtesy and respect. In fact, Sam mused, that was the way she treated everyone she met. Perhaps that was it. She exuded such genuine warmth. A senior editor with U.S. News Weekly, she was simply dignified, and obviously well thought of by everyone in the business.

"She's untouchable, Sam," Kit Bronson had noted under his breath as he brushed past him at the reception. He guessed Kit had noticed him eyeing her.

"We'll see about that," he'd shot back over his shoulder, setting his drink down and sauntering over to the gaggle of four laughing, joking younger men who'd flocked around her.

"Miss Adams?" he'd began, ignoring the others vying for her attentions. "I was wondering if you might like to spend a few minutes out in the fresh air. I'm taking a stroll in Central Park and would be pleased at your company."

"Why certainly, Mr. Robertson," she'd beamed. "Please allow me to excuse myself."

The four GQ-cover-boy-model cub reporters appeared stunned at the old man's bravado...and apparent victory.

"Don't look so down, boys," he chuckled under his breath so only they could hear him.

“It takes time to know what a woman’s really looking for.” Then he winked across the room to Kit and escorted Joy from the party, wrap in hand.

It had been a glorious spring evening, the normally grimy New York City air freshly cleansed by a light mist. The Ritz-Carlton, located on 59th and across the street from Central Park, made it easy for Sam to flag down one of the ever-present horse-drawn carriages. She gripped his hand as he helped her up into the seat. “I imagine it’s hard to maintain any sort of anonymity around here.”

Sam, struggling to keep his composure, merely stammered, “Yes, it is.” He couldn’t help but be distracted—mesmerized actually—by Joy’s style and elegance. “Although New Yorkers aren’t easily impressed by one more TV guy,” he added to restore some measure of poise.

After an awkward silence, Joy spoke up. “Well, this is nice,” she said, smiling. Her eyes flitted about the park grounds. “Reminds me of why I like New York so much.”

“Oh, why is that?” Sam probed.

“There’s always a surprise around every corner.” Her answer had been the sort expected from a cheerful, Pollyanna-like girl. He was entranced by the naive curiosity and wonder she radiated.

“Indeed,” he replied, chuckling to himself. He felt like a schoolboy; just putty in her hands, if she wanted it that way.

“Carriage,” he called suddenly to the first available horse-drawn open-air buggy he spotted. Sam waved to the driver to hold the carriage as he led Joy by the arm to the horse-drawn conveyance.

“This is nice,” she smiled, as Sam held her hand allowing her to step up first to the carriage seat. He then took his seat behind the carriage driver’s bench and handed two hundred dollars to the driver.

“Take extra time please,” he quietly posed in the horse-handler’s right ear.

They jostled along quietly for some time, finally breaking the stillness with niceties about their respective homes, families, and what had brought her to her new assignment at *U.S. News Weekly*.

“From Colorado. Grew up in Denver through the ‘70s and Salt Lake City in the 1980s,” she said. My father was a government employee. After my dad transferred to Boise, Idaho in

1990, I enrolled at Boise State, graduating with a Masters in Journalism in 1995.

While her father had worked for the Interior Department, she acquired an interest in affairs relating to the western states. Now she covered the western United States on environment and state governmental issues, she divulged.

Sam's memory-bank of newscasts long-past clicked into gear. "I was a guest once of the church out there in Salt Lake City for a Christmas interview and Special. Nice leaders. Kind people. Did a broadcast as the Christmas announcer for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, back in 19... gosh, it's been a while."

"1985," she broke in. "It was Christmas week. I was there."

"You were?" The words tumbled out in a boyish rush.

"I was a member of the Salt Lake Youth Symphony Orchestra," she explained.

"Uh oh," he mumbled. He shook his head and laughed.

"What's wrong?"

"Me. It's just me," he breathed.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No. Certainly not." He turned back towards her. "May I ask what you thought of me then. I guess you were in your teens?"

"I was a High School Senior. I told my mother I hoped I'd marry a man like you someday," she blurted out - then immediately looked away, embarrassed by her sudden revelation.

Stunned, the smile on his face turned to absolute shock. "I was much older, even then," he muttered, as much to himself as to her.

"Probably only half as old now," she offered, seeking to recover from the gaff.

Sam quickly rescued her as he did the math aloud. They both laughed. Sam couldn't believe where he was and what he was doing right then. This pleasant younger woman was amazing. She seemed possessed of a true, unadulterated guileless soul. So rare, the pure quality of goodness appeared to be her most noticeable characteristic. He was eager to know why. He asked if she would see him the next day.

"I'm sorry. Sunday is kind of special to me," replied Joy. "I promised my son Michael we'd attend church and hang out together. He's out of school on spring break, and I've found it

necessary to balance out all the other influences of the week by being strict in that area. You know, keeping one day to myself. But, perhaps another time. Here's my number...."

...

The courtship had been glorious. Highly unusual, so Sam thought, but splendidly glorious. She wouldn't let him touch her outside of kisses and snuggling together in front of the evening fire at her place. He'd met the family in Idaho, and had been accepted as warmly as he could have ever dreamed. There was some trauma over the age difference, but, once everyone had settled down, he was treated like family.

It was the heart attack that next spring that had been the shocker, leaving him flat on his back, helpless, in the coronary care unit and wondering if Joy would want a used-up, spent old man who might never even be able to jog around the block with her.

"We're going to change your diet," she'd declared matter-of-factly when she came to visit him at the hospital.

"You'll still marry me?" he uttered in disbelief.

"Of course!" she'd exclaimed, leaning down, and kissing him on the forehead. "Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

This girl had faith in him, but also a higher level of belief in something else; something beyond this world of fear, tumult, and even...death.

But it was the "final curtain" of life's drama that Sam Robertson was most afraid of. The calendar turning on him again this year, and being married to a beauty queen, meant the concept of death held something for him it had not before. It would take her away from him when it happened. "*If I die...*" he had mumbled to himself hundreds of times now, always unable to finish the sentence.

*Time*, he pondered, was against him by reason of his insurance company's mortality tables, if nothing else. And mortality tables did not lie. Dozens of friends on the other side of the great unknown proved them accurate.

Sam would be happy to believe that something out there existed, especially if it meant he could have a few more years than the doctors were telling him he had. Bad heart, failing lungs... He wondered, *What kind of God ruled this planet of death, disease, and broken hearts anyway?*



He often asked his guests this question, sometimes couching it as follow-up to an especially profound answer. His interviewees were all the great ones of the world: presidents, generals, sports stars, actors, musicians, rappers, motivational gurus, kings, queens, princes, and spiritual leaders.

Major and minor religious icons the likes of Billy and his son Franklin Graham, the Dalai Lama, high-ranking Baptist ministers, Jewish rabbis, Islamic scholars... even the Pope in Rome had once granted him an interview and been a guest on his program. And all had a common thread running through their answers to his keynote question: *“Do you believe there is a God and, if so, why does he allow so much misery in the world?”*

“Yes, Sam, I believe there is a God and that he allows individual freedom to action. It is man who fails the test, not God,” seemed to be the composite reply, as if each had been a collaborator in the answer.

Too simplistic for Sam; a universal cop-out, basically. So with Joy in his life—with all the age difference, health issues, and his complete comfort with dismissing any actual belief in a God—what would he ever be able to do to satisfy her? How could he ever measure up to her lofty expectations?

And, most importantly, how could he ever be assured of even one more glorious year by her side? He cared for her with all the youthful stirrings of a love-struck kid, despite what his aging body betrayed. To have five, ten more years assured – for that he’d sell his soul.

He had given up smoking the year before and, except for a glass of wine with his evening meals, all other vices had been surrendered. He wanted to live forever now, enjoy every moment he could with Joy. Now he could only be concerned about one day—today—and live it marvelously happy while he could, with his beautiful and very much alive wife.

## DEAD MEN DON'T LIE

More and more, his daily thoughts all seemed to bend back towards his own unbelief. As he tried to challenge the faith of another, the more he realized that his own faith remained on shaky ground.

Though a self-proclaimed agnostic, his own immortality was now a front-and-center concern, despite logic. Logic said that when you are dead, you're dead. He'd never known of anyone who, having died, had come back to talk about it. He certainly would have been delighted to interview such a person if given the chance. He'd sat with mediums, folks who claimed communication with souls beyond the grave, but that wasn't the real deal. He'd prefer a ghost, someone to talk to who *had* lived once, to give him the straight scoop on things.

*Dead men don't lie. But they don't come back to tell the truth, either,* he reasoned. And he had interviewed many a person who now was nothing more than a celluloid memory. Their images were archived in his vaults, where his *Sam Robertson Live Reports* were once stored on videotape, then transferred to indestructible digital, and catalogued by date and name.

Sam had given notice just the week before. His producers were not at all happy by the suddenness of it all, but it was in the contract in plain black and white: *A two-month notice for any reason of ill health and only one week of remaining interviews if his doctors would approve of studio work.*

The competition was heavy: his good pal Larry King had recently retired, then enjoying a few good years, unfortunately passed to the Valhalla of Prime Time Talkers. He looked up to Larry as his role model, and ironically had mirrored his fast pace and growth curve in notoriety.

Now the smooth younger commentators of radio and cable all turned up the heat. Network competition for viewers was a never-ending battle. No matter how long or how hard he worked, Sam Robertson was still needed to boost ratings. His cable producer Mary Bentley had made it her personal mission to keep him from walking out the door. "Just one more year," she'd say. But now even she, his most staunch advocate, had given up hope. She seemed flattened and stunned by the news.

“I’m sick and I’m tired, Mary. I need to quit at the top, not six feet under,” he’d told her. She wasn’t being realistic, he’d argued. He had delivered his medical file to the network execs, and she knew of his bouts with heart disease. His last surgery had made national headlines. She really shouldn’t have been surprised. *What was Mary thinking; that he’d live forever?* He winced at the thought.

Joy was an angel. She’d gone ahead and married him even amid all these questions about his health. He went home every night like a puppy dog, wagging his tail, wondering how to please her, anxious to make her happy. And she seemed to be just that: *happy*.

He was trying not to deceive himself. After all, he was one of the best judges of character he knew. Certainly he had the right to be, having conducted a few thousand interviews. He woke up every morning out of his mind in love, trying to figure out how she could act so in love with him. One of his former marriages hadn’t even lasted this long.

But now, Sam realized, he didn’t even know what lay beyond the next week. He was scheduled for another battery of tests this coming Friday. What news would Doc Gray deliver this time? That he had the heart of an 80-year-old and the lungs of a dead man? Gray was always blunt, to the point, candid to a fault. He’d always appreciated it in the past, but now Sam would prefer a few good lies.

## THE TEST

Sam entered the dressing room and traded in his suit, trademark sports shirt, and bowtie, for a set of blue pajama-like cotton trousers and matching short-sleeve shirt. He sighed heavily, wishing he were anywhere but here.

“How do I look, Maria?” He smiled a wincing smile as he sucked in his recently trimmed-at-the-waistline gut and placed his hands on hips in a Superman pose.

“Well, you still have Dudley Do-Right’s chin!” the matronly nurse cackled as she led her pitiful patient down the antiseptically clean hallway.

Sam trailed behind her, deep in thought, his superhuman bravado deflated by reality’s slap to the side of the head, and wanting desperately to have twenty-five years back.

Maria tried to brighten the moment. “Don’t look so glum. Everything will be okay, Mister Robertson. You’ve trimmed down since the last time I saw you,” she added with a wink.

“I lost weight, too,” he mocked in response.

“We’ll see about that. Step up to the scale.”

“168 to 170,” he prompted the digital scale.

“169.5 pounds. My, my, you have lost a few more pounds.”

“Told ya.”

“Why the sudden urge to do what Doctor Gray has been preaching for the last twenty years?”

He let out a deep, formerly nicotine-filled-lung-style cough. Then he shrugged. “Although we were face to face, the bathroom mirror and I weren’t seeing eye to eye. I decided to make the first move.”

She chuckled, smiled, and pointed to the chair.

“Ah, Maria, not the chair,” he moaned.

She tore a long syringe out of its package and laid it on a tray nearby. “Which arm today, Mister Robertson?”

“Left,” he sighed.

She tied the rubber band around his upper arm, restricting the flow of blood to reveal a

blue-colored vein. “Here we go,” she smiled. “Just a pinch. Try to be brave, Mr. Robertson,” she giggled.

“You’re getting a kick out of this aren’t you?” he grumbled.

“Maria the Vampire, they called me in nursing school. You should know me by now. I never hurt you yet.” She squinted and smiled as she worked to ease the needle into the vein. “Sorry, Mister Robertson. We’ll have to try again. That was a good vein years ago when I first did this.”

“I’ll have your job,” he whimpered.

“There we go. Just a little more...” She drew the needle from his arm and planted a cotton swab on the tender spot. “You keep being good like this and I’ll get you a lollipop. Hold it tight until I come back.” She picked up the blood sample and headed toward the lab down the hall, leaving him there to consider the day of tests ahead.

Joy was supposed to meet him for dinner at Mario’s off Park Avenue. He was looking forward to some indulgence after a year of abiding by a strict diet of vegetables, fish, skim milk, and no real alcohol.

After dinner they’d spend the night at the place where they met, the Ritz-Carlton, followed by an uninterrupted week at a \$2,000-per-day hide-a-way in the Bahamas. Sam could hardly wait to focus all his attentions on Joy, and the love they shared. To be loved by her was more than the icing on the cake of a lifetime full of professional satisfaction. She was the cake, the reason he’d worked so hard for so long. *But why had it taken so long to find the love of his life?* His mind swirled around the question as he waited for Maria to take him through the remaining tests.

“This way, please, Mister Robertson,” she motioned, awakening him from his musings.

“Treadmill?”

“Uh huh,” she mumbled, smiling. “Here we go. Your own private exercise room. Rudy,” she called to the technician in the room next door. “Let’s hook Mister Robertson up. I’ll shave,” she giggled.

“You enjoy this job too much, Maria,” Sam whined.

“Okay. Off with your shirt,” she cooed, holding a double-edge razor in her hand.

“I’m going on my first anniversary honeymoon tonight. Please go light on the chest hair.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to live with some bald spots,” she answered merrily as she drew the razor’s edge just inches over his left nipple. “Oops,” she sounded startled. “Just kidding.”

“Look, Maria. Go easy,” he grumbled. “I’m serious!”

She stood back and gazed approvingly at her handiwork. “I don’t think you look at all bad,” she assured him.

“Ahh... What’s the use. I didn’t feel like taking my shirt off in public anymore anyway,” he sarcastically grouched.

“Ready to be wired, Mister Robertson?” Rudy asked as he wheeled the EKG machine up next to the treadmill.

Sam nodded.

“Okay. We’ll start you out on an easy pace, then...”

“Yeah, yeah. I know the routine,” Sam gestured. “Let’s go.”

Rudy taped on the final probe, switched on the machine, and began to monitor Sam’s heart rate, blood pressure levels and all the rest.

Sam feigned disinterest, but did keep an eye on Rudy’s face for any signs of concern with the readings he monitored on the real-time screen. The technician, however, stoically performed his duties. “Cranking up the treadmill. Any problems?”

Sam offered a “thumbs up” as his pace quickened to the demands of the wide, whirring band that caused his stride to lengthen.

“Okay, Mister Robertson. Going to speed it up just a bit more. How’s the breathing? Dizzy, faint?”

“I’m fine, Rudy,” Sam huffed.

A minute passed. “How am I doing, Rudy?” he asked as he got into the jogging portion of the test.

Rudy gave a slight nod as he studied the report issuing from the machine. “I think that’s enough. I’m going to shut the machine down to a walk.”

Sam stepped off the machine and bent over, hands on knees, to regain his breath. “That wasn’t so bad,” he panted.

Rudy patted his arm. “You just have a seat right here. Would you like to lie down?”

“No, I want to keep going. Get these accursed exams over with. I’ve got a hot date and...”

Hey! Where are you going?"

"You wait right here, I'll be back in a sec," said the technician, hurrying out of the room.

Sam didn't want to feel nervous over Rudy's abruptness, so he leaned back, head against the wall, and visualized himself and Joy lying side by side on the shores of a mountain lake.

"Everything is going perfect. All good," he repeated in self-talk. It was a relaxation technique he'd learned from one of his guests on the show. All he had to do was think of something serene, pleasant, and tranquil.

*Think the color blue*, he said to himself; his eyelids drooping down over his pupils. *Bring the breathing down, heart rate too*. He knew his blood pressure would follow. A slight pain in his chest, the pain he felt now, was normal. He decided he wouldn't let it bother him.

"Are you okay, Mister Robertson?" Maria asked gently, entering the room with a new sense of urgency.

"What's all the flap about? And what's that for?" he demanded sternly, pointing to the wheel chair positioned ominously at the open door.

"I'll need to take you in for immediate observation. Doctor Gray ordered it after reviewing your EKG."

"That bad?" He grinned, hoping to dispel the somber expression on Maria's face.

No response.

She helped him with his shirt and then pulled up the chair, pointing for him to be seated.

"Maria, really. I'm fine. I walked in here you know."

"And I want you to walk out of here," she countered sternly. "Now sit."

There was no arguing. "You know, I've got a very important engagement tonight," he reminded her.

She answered him with a worried expression and a nod of the head.

"I'm feeling fine, really," Sam restated, in an attempt to reassure her, and himself.

"Doctor Gray will be right in. Relax now," she replied. "I'll be right back."

Sam knew what this meant. But he wasn't going to give in easily. Tonight was far too important to him.

## GOOD OMEN

“Did I hear you use curse words just now, Mister Sam Robertson?” Maria asked as she began hooking Sam up to the telemetry heart monitor.

“You sure did. Is this really necessary?”

“Doctor’s orders.”

“How about patient’s rights? When am I going to see Doc Gray, anyway?”

“He’d like you to rest, allow us to do this exam under conditions of observation. Then he’ll be in to tell you what’s going on. Come on, now,” she said in her most motherly voice as she fluffed the pillows behind his head. “Let’s not get your blood pressure up over this. It’s for your own good.”

“For my own good...” he mumbled like a toddler surrendering to a grownup.

“Just press this button by the bed if you need me. Here’s the television controls, if you want to watch TV. I’ll be back every few minutes to check on you.”

Sam just waved her off as she exited the private single-bed hospital room. He was angry and resentful. He should have waited for these tests until after his second honeymoon trip was over. He didn’t dare call Joy to alarm her. He was determined to see Doc Gray, get some answers, and walk out of there today. He’d had bypass surgery once and was warned that if he didn’t stop smoking and drinking, he’d be digging an early grave for himself. He amazed himself by quitting cold turkey a little more than one year ago, right after meeting Joy. No more smokes, no more drinks.

He lay back, his stare burning a hole in the white acoustic tile ceiling, grappling for a way out. He needed to find a way to improve his biological aging and general health. He needed Joy. More than he could explain, he needed her and loved her. The patterned acoustic ceiling tile didn’t respond. If he *was* given a second chance, just one more decade to experience Joy’s love deeply and completely, he might be willing to bargain with God—show up in church—give up Sunday sports.

“God, if you can hear me, I’ll regularly grace the threshold of your house if you will give



me more time with Joy,” he whispered.

*That was big of me*, he chuckled cheerlessly to himself. He pondered for a moment on the emptiness of that kind of prayer. Yet that is what he was willing to offer. He would sacrifice his one day of golf, hunting, fishing, NFL games, even his single glass of dinner wine... What else was there?

Sam’s mournful mental petition was suddenly interrupted by a familiar voice; clinical and anything but soothing.

“Sam, how are you feeling?” asked Doctor Gray, chart in hand.

“I’m feeling fine, thanks. But I’m not happy with all this.” Sam’s arm swept back and forth to take in the array of machines, tubes, and medical paraphernalia.

“Sam, I’ll shoot straight with you, but you need to shoot straight with me. Have you been experiencing pain?”

“Acid reflux. A little heartburn. I have ulcers, you know.”

“Tingling down your left arm, leg, feet, toes?”

“Maybe a tickle...”

“Out of breath over simple tasks?”

“I quit smoking. My lungs are adjusting, that’s all.”

“Somewhat faint, lightheaded, dizzy?”

“Well, I fell in love last year...”

“Okay,” interrupted Doctor Gray, ignoring his patient’s casual attitude. He squinted down at his chart. “I’ve got some bad news and good news. Which do you want first?”

Sam breathed out through pursed lips. “Give me the good.”

“You’re alive.”

“Oh.”

“You’re alive and there’s hope for a number of years yet in that overused heart of yours. Is that better?”

“The bad news?” Sam asked dejectedly.

“You need immediate bypass surgery.”

“I just had bypass surgery when... a couple of years ago—remember?”

“That’s right. But you need it again. Quadruple bypass, this time, Sam.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sam, I’ve seen this movie a thousand times. Your blood flow is severely restricted, here and here.” His index finger wandered across Sam’s chest and down his left arm. He pulled up a stool and sat next to the bed. “You must listen to me, now. I’ve known people with the symptoms you have who died before they were able to get through the door of this building. But the treadmill tests aren’t always completely accurate. Just to make sure, I’ve ordered an immediate angiogram.”

“I hate those things. Can’t you just x-ray me or something?” Sam pleaded. “A full-body scan with one of those new fancy do-everything, painless, see-it-all machines?”

“I need more information, if we’re going to open you up again. I need to slide a catheter in, shoot dye into the veins, take a picture of your main coronary arteries. At minimum, you need to stay overnight for observation before we make the final decision.”

Sam lay in heavy silence as the doctor observed the heart monitor he was hooked up to. Then, finally, he spoke up. “How serious is it?”

Doctor Gray pointed at the jagged blips on the screen, as if dusting the front of the EKG machine with the tip of his finger. “See this line here? The rhythm of your heart is this line. You are heartbeats away from it going flat.”

“Ah, hell, Doc,” sighed Sam. “There’s got to be another way. How ‘bout aspirin?”

Doctor Gray didn’t respond.

“There’s got to be another way,” Sam pled again.

“The other way is a bed sheet pulled up over your head.”

“You don’t need to be so callously truthful.”

“So, if you’ll sign this form, we’ll get started.”

Sam glanced over the authorization form, detailing a number of tests and possible surgery, then handed it back, saying, “No, thanks.”

“What do you mean?” Doctor Gray snapped in a clearly annoyed tone of voice.

“I mean I’m not going through with it...not for a week, anyway.”

“You have a death-wish or something?”

“No, I want to live. Really live. I have a date with my wife tonight and a week in the Bahamas planned. I’m no worse today than I was last month, and the month before that. I’ll be

careful and be back in a week.”

“I can’t agree with that decision, Sam. Listen, this is me. I’m more than your doctor. We golf together, remember? We’ve been hell-raising together, two guys out on the town during our single days. This is Tom Gray talking now. I can’t, in good conscience, let you off the hook this easy.”

“It’s my decision to make. You won’t be held responsible if anything happens to me.”

“Okay, Sam. But as a professional, your leaving this hospital today will be under official protest. I’ll have to ask you to fill out an AMA form.”

“What’s an AMA form?”

“A rarely-used document buried in our files somewhere. It’s called an “Against Medical Advice” form. I need to make sure the evidence is clear that I performed my best medical observation, noting the advice given you from me, and your rejection of it. You’re a stubborn man, Sam.” He shook his head. “But it’s your call.”

“Send Maria in with the form. I’ll sign it and be back next week. Go ahead and schedule me for a week from tomorrow.”

“Sam, go easy on yourself on this trip. You know what I mean. Keep your excitement level balanced, avoid the rich foods. No smoking, drinking.”

Sam smirked, “Excitement level down. Fat chance.”

“Good luck, Sam,” he said, brushing off his friend’s nonchalance with another shake of the head.

“Hey, you act like it’s over with me or something. Don’t worry.”

The doctor said nothing as he turned and left the room.

“Mister Robertson, I’ve been told you’re being released. Your clothes are in the closet here. When you’re ready, I’ll need your signature on this form.” She laid it on a tray next to the bed. “Then you’re free to go.”

“Thank you, Maria. You know, I like you. I’ll be back next week with something special from the Bahamas for you.” He shot her his most confident smile.

“You just be sure to come back standing up,” she warned, wagging her finger at him. “That’ll be good enough for me.”

“What a God-forsaken, lousy mood these people are in,” Sam mumbled as he slipped his

trousers on. Minutes later, standing outside, a crisp winter chill greeted him.

*Maybe I can put this off until spring. I'll take the week off for Easter; let them cut me open. Then I'll come out a new man. And besides, he considered, Easter is a time of resurrection. A good omen, he thought as he hailed a cab for his rendezvous with Joy.*

## ARMS OF JESUS

“Hello, babe,” Sam said as he greeted her with a tender kiss. “You look marvelous, dear...*absolutely ma'velous*,” he whispered, stealing a cue from his friend, comedian Billy Crystal.

“Thank you, Sam. Why the fancy duds?” Joy asked, smiling as she ran her slender fingers down the lapel of his suit coat.

“I just want to look my best for you. Tonight’s special; this whole week is special. I had these fitted by Alexander’s down on Seventh Avenue.”

“Suspenders and all?” she grinned. “What would Larry say?” she asked smiling.

“Suspenders and all. I always wanted to be Larry when I grew up. Come on. I’ve got our table reserved.” He slipped a 50-dollar bill into a waiter’s palm and they followed him to a private corner; a table situated next to a gas-lit flame glowing in a hearthstone fireplace.

“This turn-of-the-century fireplace is all that’s left of the original building,” Sam observed as they were seated. “Did you know it was a bar where the mob—gangsters from the 1920s and ‘30s hung out?”

Joy, obviously unimpressed, nodded and beamed back at him. “So, how did the physical go today?” she asked casually.

“Movie stars, police, and government officials on the take, all made this place the bar of choice,” Sam pressed on. “The Irish mob had it for a few years, then the Italians moved in. Pretty interesting stuff.”

Joy, however, wouldn’t be deterred. “So,” she tried again, “what did the doc say?”

“*I’m gonna get dat bunny wabbit if its da wast fing I do*,” he replied with a grin. “You know. Bugs Bunny? *Eh... What’s up Doc?*” he imitated. “The guy with the shotgun pointing it down the bunny hole?”

“Sam?” she protested.

“Healthy as an ox,” he answered, hoping she wouldn’t pursue it further.

“What kind of an ox?” she laughed good-naturedly.

“More a bull than ox.... Yeah. Like a bull...a raging, out-of-control Pamplona bull,” he added, using his fingers to imitate horns.

“Sounds dangerous,” she smiled as the waiter handed her a menu.

*If you only knew*, he thought to himself. They ordered. All the while she eyed him suspiciously. Perhaps she detected some uncertainty in his facial expression or his posture. A minute or two passed—he wasn’t sure. Then suddenly she stated matter-of-factly, “Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” came the cavalier reply, eyes traveling the menu in an attempt to hide the truth.

Joy reached across the candle-lit table and put her hand in his. “Remember the night we met?”

“Of course.”

“I thought I was fulfilled, totally content—inside, I mean. I had my son, a good job, and God. But not a man. You made me feel whole.”

Sam reddened with embarrassment. The window to his soul was broken as a solitary drop of moisture appeared at the corner of each eye. No woman had ever said to him anything close to that.

“And you make me feel whole.” His words came out stilted; forced. Thought filled the silent void as they held hands, gently rubbing fingers together, smiling at one another, seeming to sense that the other had more on his or her mind than words could account for.

“There is one thing that bothers me though,” Joy added tenderly, after a moment more of the awkward stillness.

“What’s that?” Sam asked, searching her stunning azure eyes.

She hesitated, then simply stated the thing that troubled her. “You’re *not* whole, *not* complete, and I don’t know how to make it better.”

“What do you mean? I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my entire life. You’ve brought me so much happiness. I’ve never been more whole...”

“Empty,” she insisted.

“Joy, what are you saying?” he asked emphatically. He leaned forward in his chair and jutted his face so close to the center-piece candle that it felt at least as hot as the sudden stirrings

of frustration roiling inside him.

“Can you honestly say you feel one hundred percent complete? Or do you sense something is missing?”

“Okay, Joy, I surrender. Tell me what I’m missing,” he challenged, slumping back in his seat.

“Sam, I want your happiness. I also look at what you’ve done for me, for Michael, and how hard you try to be better in every way. I love your generosity, the kindness you show, your humor, and I think you’re handsome. It isn’t hard to be in love with you, but it is hard knowing something about wholeness and not knowing how to convey it to you in a way that you will embrace, and accept.”

“Go on, Joy. I’m listening.”

“When I was nine-years-old, I came down with scarlet fever. As you know, it can turn into a life-threatening illness, permanently damaging the heart. And that’s exactly what happened. Within days, I was at Primary Children’s Hospital fighting for my life. There were many prayers said for me.

“My father and mother were constantly at my bedside and I felt somehow safe. I told them I knew Jesus would make me better and not to worry. I knew if they were there, praying for and with me, that everything would be alright. But one night something wonderful began to happen. My father was there at my bedside. He fell asleep, and I thought I was calling out to him, frightened, at first, by this strange feeling inside of me. Then I became very warm, happy, and free from pain and illness.

“I felt myself leave my bed, light as a feather. I was walking toward a bright but happy glow. It was the warmest sensation, far warmer than sunlight feels, but it didn’t burn. My entire insides tingled with excitement. I felt wonderful! The light soon gathered around a man standing there, and I knew who it was, instinctively.

“He reached his hand out to me and I took it, totally unafraid and willing to be with him. We sat down on a stone-type bench beside a fountain in the middle of the prettiest meadow, with so many different kinds of flowers. The colors were incredible. Then the man asked me, ‘*How do you feel?*’ as he safely cradled me in his arms. “I feel whole again, like I’m home,” my innocent mind answered back.

“*Little one,*’ he said, *‘your faith has made you whole.’* Then he kissed me on the forehead and walked me back toward the same light. I didn’t want to go back, but realized I must.

“The next thing I knew I was in my bed, crying, with nurses and a doctor milling around, all concerned, giving me oxygen. One of the nurses was listening for my heartbeat, and my parents were crying. They leaned down and hugged me when I coughed a breath of air.

“The next day, a doctor came to my room and was going down a checklist with my parents, marveling at the turnaround in my health, and said, ‘Looks like we’ve cured her. You can take her home now.’

“You didn’t cure me...” I remember blurting out. They all smiled and we went home. Later, I told my parents about the experience and they believed me, but nothing more was ever made of it.

“Sam, from that day on, I’ve never feared death. My childlike faith had made me ‘whole,’ but the love I felt with—well you know who—Jesus, was real to me, and still is.”

Sam’s mind was reeling. “I wish I could believe like that,” he responded simply. “Why haven’t you shared this with me before?”

“Some things are too personal. I’ve learned that just because one person has a sacred experience, that doesn’t necessarily mean that others will believe. I’ve been ridiculed for my faith in the past, so I just quietly live it. That’s something I want you to have...faith, I mean. But I don’t know how to give mine to you.” She paused as she searched for the way to finish her thought.

Sam leaned back in his chair, his lips tightening into a polite smile.

“What’s wrong?” Joy asked.

“Nothing’s wrong. Here comes the food,” he beamed and rubbed his hands together. “I love you, Joy. Promise you won’t give up on me.”

“I promise.”



## REGRETS

The screeching, pneumatic wail of the ambulance siren sent taxis jostling to the sides of the busy intersection, clearing a narrow path as they rushed him to New York City Hospital. Joy sat in the back, holding Sam's hand as he fought the crushing pain in his chest.

"I love you, sweetheart," she offered tearfully, kissing the tip of his middle knuckle while trying to avoid getting in the way of the two EMT's hunched over him on each side.

He nodded bravely, seeking a way to tell her he'd make it, that he'd be okay if she would just stay by him. The EMT's rushed him into the emergency room. The ER staff bustled to his side, stabilizing him before prepping him for the immediate surgery.

"Mrs. Robertson?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Tom Gray. I'm a friend of Sam's and his personal physician," he said, reaching out his hand to greet her.

"Oh! Thank you for coming!" She dabbed at the puffiness that had formed around her eyes. "I've heard good things about you from Sam."

"Well, I've tried to stay on his good side. Naturally, you must know of my concern for his condition."

"Of course," she replied, gaining more composure. "Will he be...alright?" she asked.

"That's what I came down to talk to you about. Please, take a seat in here..." He guided her gently by the arm to an empty clerk's room off the waiting area.

"So—are they going to perform surgery right away?"

"They're prepping him as we speak."

"Will you do the surgery?"

"No. I've asked a friend, a highly trained specialist to take charge. But I'll be in the operating room, right there by his side. There's something else going on I need to let you know about. It complicates this a bit."

Joy appeared momentarily confused, gesturing for him to continue.

“He’s bleeding profusely. It looks as though it’s been going on in a mild form for some time. He has stomach ulcers, but it wasn’t detected this morning in exams. This is sudden and massive. We’ll be doing two surgeries before this is over. Right now, he’s receiving a blood transfusion.”

“He’s tough,” she reassured herself, nodding at her own, whispered affirmation.

“Yes, he is. That’s making the difference right now,” agreed the physician. “In any case, I thought you should know. I’ll be there the entire time.”

“I appreciate that so much,” she replied, feigning a smile. She paused to gather her emotions, then continued. “What are his chances? I think you have a percent figure in cases like this?”

“Yes. I would put it at 50/50 right now. He’s in extremely critical condition. I guess he told you he waived the advice I gave him this morning?”

“No. I don’t understand. What do you mean ‘waived’?” she asked, clearly perplexed by the statement.

“Sam signed a form stating that he understood he was rejecting my advice that he be admitted immediately for possible bypass surgery. Frankly, I don’t know how he lasted so long in his present condition. Most men die from these kinds of cardiac arrests. He has a very strong will to live.”

“I still don’t understand.” Her head wagged in numb disbelief, her voice crackling with emotion. “I hear what you just said about the waiver, but I don’t understand why Sam wouldn’t take your advice. He’s not stupid. Why would he do this?” Her reddened eyes, now swimming in tears, posed the same question her voice just had. “You couldn’t force him?”

“No. Force is not something we can do. And no one forces Sam on anything, anyway. I learned that long ago.”

“I feel lost. I don’t know what to do,” Joy squeaked out as she trembled, finally breaking down.

Doctor Gray pulled up his chair alongside hers and offered his arm. “He’s alive because of you, Joy. You are the reason he’ll pull through this. If you believe in miracles, it’s a good time to pray for one. Can you do that? I can send the hospital’s chaplain in to visit with you, if you like.”

Joy patted his arm. “No, that’s fine. I’ll be okay. I do believe. It will turn out according to God’s will,” she sniffled. “Thank you. I feel better talking to you. Is there another waiting area closer to the operating room?”

He nodded. “I’ll take you there. I promise to keep you fully informed during the next couple of hours.” He gestured towards the door. “Shall we?”

For the next several hours, Joy’s mind swam in a blur of emotions. Then it finally settled on the blustering Sam, so filled with answers, so filled with life. She had come to love him deeply. At last, her mind turned to an argument months ago; one she wished they hadn’t had.

...

“How can you know? I mean, you haven’t seen this Jesus you so adamantly argue is the *real* deal...”

“Don’t you even believe he lived?”

“I’m not that stupid,” he huffed. “Of course, I believe he lived. The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming.”

They were standing in the kitchen, she cooking Sunday dinner, and he having just arrived from an early morning golf outing. “Can’t we just spend the Sunday alone—and not attend another Sunday worship meeting? It’s been six months straight now without a miss.”

“It’s practically my only day off,” he pled.

“Is that my fault? You knew this about me when you married me. Maybe you should work less.”

“Look, if God exists, he’s not going to strike us down for missing a day at church here or there.”

“What do you mean by ‘...missing a day here or there’? You’ve been all of two times in six months.”

Sam scoffed. “I don’t want to get the man upstairs too used to seeing me there. I wouldn’t want to put him or anyone else into a state of shock.”

“You are so sacrilegious!” she fumed.

“No, I’m just not so sacrosanct. I just don’t happen to believe...” he cut his remark short, inserting in its place his favorite expletive.

“You don’t need to swear!” she responded angrily.

He rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Look,” she said, teary-eyed, spatula in hand, “...maybe you don’t believe, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t so. Jesus, is testified of and witnessed and praised by more people through history than any other man...including you!”

Sam shrugged at the last jab. “He’s *referred* to more than any other man of his time period and generation, I grant you that. But so much has been done in this Jesus’ name. Wars fought, crusades waged, lives taken. What kind of God is that?”

Joy refused to be baited.

Sam sought a calmer, more conciliatory tone. “Look, Joy, I need evidence. You can’t just wander around believing in someone who’s been dead for two thousand years just because a bunch of fanatical followers make a bunch of strident claims about his magical powers.”

“There was a book written, you know,” she countered. “It has been a bestseller year after year for several centuries now. What do you think of that, Sam? Your only book made it to the bestseller list for, what, two weeks? You can’t fool me, Sam. I know you’ve been reading the scriptures I gave you for Christmas when I’m away at church; alone!”

“I have a healthy curiosity, yes. I’m not totally cold, or unwilling to be convinced. It’s just that, for me, I can believe in God in a number of ways. Out in nature, for example—out there I see a greater design. I actually think about the possibility of God when I go hunting or fishing with my brothers.” Sam realized he’d touched a deep nerve in Joy as soon as the words had tumbled from his lips. Stammering, he began to backtrack, apologize, looking for a way to take back what he’d said.

“Listen, Sam,” Joy tearfully said, pointing directly at him now. “My first husband used to say that same thing to me all the time and—”

Sam interrupted her, “I know, babe,” he said softly, gently, approaching her to stroke her face, her arms. “I’m sorry. I know. I didn’t mean...”

“You hear me out,” she demanded, pulling away from him. “It’s funny how many men go hunting for God with a gun and a rod and reel in hand. Michael Sr. was killed on an iced-over

highway in Wyoming out ‘hunting for God,’ while I was home taking our little boy to church. You have no idea how let down I felt by that,” tearfully adding, “I won’t buy into that macho nonsense again!”

• • •

That had been nearly six months ago now. He was a good man, a kind man. He had more belief than he really understood.

*If only*, she thought. *If only some greater power could intercede, give him the chance he needed to see.* If his heart could be made whole. She closed her eyes in silent prayer, bowing her head with promises as she bargained with God to let him live, even just a few years more.

Now, with nothing more she could do, she folded her arms, laid her head back in the waiting room chair, and let her exhausted mind give way to desperately needed slumber. No matter what happened, she would stay with him, right to the end.

## NEAR DEATH

Somewhere in the fog of semi-consciousness Sam was aware that he was being prepped for surgery, but unable and too weak to offer many words of thanks to those working to save his life.

Sedated, he felt he was drifting. He knew the feeling from his past surgery. The pain in his chest had diminished and he felt relaxed, though hooked up to respirators and monitored carefully by the intensive care unit nurses.

His pupils contracted in response to the overhead lamps directly above his head. He could feel his arms being extended and strapped down to the germ-free stainless-steel fold-out sleeves of the operating table—as if positioning him in a T-like human-size crucifix—his arms stretched wide for whatever was to come.

Strange...he could make out the face of the nurse speaking to him, patting him so gently, as if he were dying. He saw her sympathetic face reassuring him from above. “I’m Janean,” she articulated in a way that made it seem that her patient spoke some sort of foreign tongue. “I’ll be right here with you. You’ll be fine, Mister Robertson. I promise,” she was saying.

He mouthed a slurred reply, now that the anesthetics were taking their full effect. “My older sister’s name is Janean,” he mumbled. “Gone. Gone a long time,” he ended. He could see the nurse’s lips moving, hear the muffled sounds of other voices, but now he felt at peace, relaxed, totally submissive, as his eyes, heavy from drugs, willingly surrendered to the coming darkness.

...

“Who are you?” he asked the large man in the white robe walking him down the corridor to the elevator.

No answer, just a smile from his escort.

“How did my surgery go? Must have gone well—I’m feeling great,” he chuckled, mostly

to himself as they passed through the open door.

“So, we going to post-op? Checking out, maybe?” Sam’s questions rolled from his lips as they strode briskly down the long, brightly lit, antiseptically clean corridor.

The big man smiled. “I’m sure you will find your accommodations acceptable and the company agreeable,” he said as they entered the elevator.

Sam felt comfortable. No reason not to. The operation had been a breeze and he was feeling like a million bucks, ready to go on that anniversary trip with Joy. He wondered where she was.

“Your wife is a good woman, Samuel,” his host noted as the elevator doors slid open. “She has been praying for you.”

The tall, athletic-looking man ushered Sam out of the elevator into a lush garden landscape filled with more varieties of gloriously painted flowers, emerald tinted shrubs, and trees in all varieties than Sam had ever seen in one place.

“Wow!” he offered in a reverent and spontaneous childlike refrain. “They usually give me the best room in the hospital—the best view—but this? Why haven’t I seen it before?” he mumbled, awed by his new surroundings.

The large man backed his way into the elevator. “Make yourself at home, Samuel,” he called. “Do your report well.”

Sam nodded, lost in the utter magnificence of the place. Nearby, a fountain bubbled from a crystalline pool, sending a fine mist of water into the sky, creating an arcing rainbow and scattering dew-like droplets upon ferns, flowers, and the lower, spongy groundcover. The waters finally collected to form a gently flowing rivulet that led down a slightly inclined trail.

“Where does it lead?” Sam found himself asking no one.

“Why don’t you find out?” he heard the voice, more distant now, as he turned to face it.

“Hello! Sir? Hello?” Sam poked his head around the courtyard-oasis, peering back over his shoulder in search of the hospital elevator. A forest wall of well-manicured willows, aspen, fir, and elegantly trimmed leafy shrubs greeted him. Sam had visited the gardens of Versailles, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, Powerscourt Gardens in Enniskerry, Ireland, and Dumbarton Oaks Gardens in Washington D.C., among other notable botanical masterpieces, but this one seemed to combine them all!

Mingling with the forest green were carpets of lawn so finely trimmed as to make the most avid golfer forget his putter and just stand in awe and admiration. Scattered among the flora grew exquisitely cared-for orchids of every color and variety—their heavy ivory and crimson heads bowing as if to give homage to a master gardener. Sam found himself in deep wonder as he caressed the velvet petals. *Bird of Paradise; Joy's favorite*, he thought.

He followed the spring waters path as it meandered as a rivulet through the serene mix of scented flower and leafy green which soothed Sam's mind. He lingered here and there to admire some botanical artistry, totally unaware of the passing of time, and momentarily forgetting the man who had brought him here.

But one thing called to him. It was a deep love for Joy. She simply had to see this place. With her and this garden there would be nothing more in life he could ask to experience.

"Little rose," he said to the petite cardinal painted miniature positioned among others. "If you could speak, what would you say?" He smiled as he closed his eyes and imagined.

*I am happy to serve you and the Master*, he thought it came back in reply.

"That's right little friend. We all have a purpose, don't we?" he posed gently, unaware of the philosophical shift that had overtaken his senses. *The Hospital Board of Governors is to be congratulated*, he thought. *That will be the first thing I do when released*.

Then he'd have Mary Bentley, his show's producer, invite them on, explain how all this aided in the healing process. No doubt he was the first guest to see it. They were trying to make an impression on him. That was it. Sure. He was an important figure in the media. It would go a long way in their efforts to gain notoriety for this new remodel if, on his show, he made mention of their rehabilitation garden. Now everything was coming together.

He turned from the roses to continue down the path, ambling along one side of the sparkling brook, stopping betimes to scoop some of the tempting moisture into his hands, letting it trickle through his fingers. *Like liquefied diamond*, he mused.

Sam brought some to his lips. It was sweet, satisfying, cool. "Should bottle this and call it 'Eternal Springs'," he chuckled aloud, conscious of the meanderings of his medically sedated mind.

*The hospital had really performed a miracle*, he thought. *Good idea. Walls with scenes so real... And no one could get hurt trying to leave. Why would they want to?* His mind



wandered to explore a thousand other possibilities.

All his worries seemed a million miles away right now. The anesthesiologist was to be congratulated. It really had made him relaxed. *As a matter of fact, it felt so good, he should have surgery more often.* Sam chuckled at the thought. *This is a splendid dream,* he decided. He wondered if he would awaken soon. He really didn't mind this at all. *This is way better than the Bahamas,* he silently mused, pleased at the serene powers his mind had assumed.

*Check in here with Joy instead. That would be nice,* he thought, smiling, and now talking to himself in a normal, everyday tone of voice. *Time to wake up now Sam,* he reminded himself as he continued to follow the brook, winding its way into a ravine.

The streamlet, once so full of crystal-clear babbling water, now had run almost dry. What water remained seemed to flow into a space empty of plant life; an arid desert landscape of rock and sand. *What's this?* his mind silently posed.

*"A place where you may forever quench your thirst,"* came a soft voice to his mind.

"Such a pleasant voice," he muttered, "but not real." In fact, a bone-dry stretch of sand now paralleled the streamlet until it swallowed it entirely, the hollow of its bed disappearing into the foot of a forbiddingly steep knoll, devoid of vegetation.

*How did they do that?* he marveled, kicking at the sandy mixture with... *Leather sandals... Hmm.* He reached down to stroke their soft straps. His body felt no pain whatsoever; in fact, he was as strong and vibrant as a thirty-year-old. Mystified, he marveled at his rapid recovery from surgery.

He inspected the fine quality of his hospital gown, his hands caressing the satiny... *toga?* He spun around to look for the garden he had just come from. "Where in the..." he muttered. "Am I..." he asked aloud without adding "dead."

Nothing but desolation for as far as his eyes could see. It was as if he had entered some sort of dreamed-up, sci-fi flick of the mind caused, he guessed, by the drugs he'd been administered. At any moment he expected the famed black-and-white '60s *Twilight Zone* TV series host Rod Serling to appear. *I really gotta wake up now,* he implored. "Uh oh..." he stammered.

Inner doubt had suddenly shattered the serenity that had enveloped him just moments before. Now he was caught in a whirlpool of panic; an out-of-control state-of-being that rarely, if

ever he had sensed before. In real life, Sam Robertson was always in control.

After a virtual paradise, this sudden abandonment into a hellish landscape of sandy dryness brought about a terror beyond any he could imagine with his waking mind. The realization that he was being played by some power greater than himself, spurred Sam to force thoughts into his brain designed to calm himself—help him find a level of equilibrium—and understand the situation so he could manage it.

His thoughts were quickly suspended by the tingle of something running across his foot. Sam instinctively reached down to scratch at it. “God help me!” he screamed, kicking violently at the fist-size scorpion that had taken a defensive posture next to his instep. “Help me, God! Get me out of here! Somebody. Anybody! What’s going on?”

He turned and scuttled headlong in the direction from which he had come. A few hurried strides brought him face to face with the awfulness of his predicament. Before him lay nothing but sand; miles and miles of desert wasteland.

“Is this a test?” he cried loudly. “Hello!” he called to the emptiness. He suddenly realized that he must be dead. That the garden was a mocking vision of heaven offered to him just before his soul was abandoned into hell. His racing heart skipped a beat. *I must be alive. I feel it pounding like it did when I ran for my life ten years ago in Pamplona, Spain just to feel the rush Hemingway had described.* When a mad, raging bull charges at you, Sam knew, it’s the experience of a lifetime. On that occasion, at least, its horns had found another adventurer instead of him.

He glanced about for an answer. Suddenly, he was short of breath. The hill rose up once more in front of him, filling the horizon, and a strange noise was coming from somewhere beyond it. He hadn’t heard it ‘til now. *Children laughing. People. Other patients,* Sam assured himself. *They don’t laugh like that in hell, do they?*

He felt the rush of wind and a soft breeze blow against his brow and then into his inner ear came a voice. “*You are neither dead, nor fully alive. That will only happen when you report what you find. Look!*”

Sam gasped at the sudden instruction. The voices that came when he asked for help were real; asleep, dead, it did not matter. He was not creating this two-way dialogue. Whatever the truth was, he realized it could not be found without investigation. Moving in any direction was

better than the alternative.

Anxious to solve the riddle of his baffling surroundings, Sam scuttled up the steep rise that lay before him. He moved forward seeking where the voices came from. Reaching its crest, his eyes set upon a small cluster of brick dwellings, clean and whitewashed but definitely of third-world styles.

Desert homes, these were situated in a depression that ran between this hill and two others beyond. A road led from the village to a higher elevation; barren with low-lying spring grasses and dry shrubs, rolling spanning the eastern and western horizons. *I'm losing my mind. This stuff they put me to sleep with... I'm hot, and perspiring - thirsty, too. Can that happen in a dream?*

His mind answered its own interrogatory. He stumbled as he jogged down the gentle slope, falling hands first, scratching and peeling the skin on his palms. They bled! He sat up, stunned, checking himself out, unsure of his new world... who he was... where he was... what was happening.

Seemingly, from out of nowhere, the sturdy grip of a strong hand reached down and lifted him up by his shoulders. "You!" Sam cried out when he turned to see his rescuer. "It's you! What is this, some kind of joke? You escorted me to a garden, and now this?"

The strapping man held up his hand as if to slow Sam down. "You are alive, are you not?" the resonating voice asked.

"If this is a dream, it is the most vivid one I've ever had. I was in heaven one minute and the next in—"

"Hell?" The man smiled. "Quite a contrast, no?"

"This is not funny. I want to wake up. I demand to wake up!" Sam huffed.

"You are Samuel Robertson, the famous personality who conducts television interviews?"

Sam nodded.

"Here, let me cleanse those wounds for you." The congenial fellow then picked up a dried gourd with a hole in the top and tilted it above Sam's scraped hands. From the gourd flowed a startlingly steady stream of water, bathing his hands in its cool, soothing wetness. The man then gently dried them on the sash of his own immaculate robe.

“Am I dead?” Sam had interviewed guests who claimed to have had near-death experiences. Could he now be experiencing one? “I am dead, right?” he asked again.

“What would you like, Samuel?” the tall man posed as he looked Sam in the eyes.

“Answers. I ask the questions, you answer,” he replied annoyed.

“Look around you. What do you see?” his host answered as he began now cleansing Sam’s feet with the same water-filled gourd, drying them with the same robe.

Sam scanned the area once more, trying to see something—anything else that he had overlooked before. “I see an ancient looking village of dried mud-brick homes, a few palm trees, some goats, a couple of children playing. I’m in the Middle East. Probably some poor country, like Yemen, where time has stood still for two thousand years.”

“Very perceptive. Yet time, as you know it, doesn’t stand still, Samuel,” the man said kindly, as if instructing a child. “It is always *present*, yet always elastic. Yes, you are indeed in the Middle East. And you are standing in a village that is very much two thousand years old—yet, also very much alive, as it was then. You are in Emmaus, and but a half-day’s journey up that road is Jerusalem.”

“Wait. Hold on. We walk down the hospital corridor, enter an elevator, and it opens into this courtyard and garden. And now I’ve gone back in time to the land of Israel in the year...”

“...A.D. 33, as you would call it,” the man said, smiling. “It’s the 7th day and the first month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar. Yes. The past is very much alive. And you have been given a chance to experience it for a very special reason. You have a broken heart, Samuel. But it is broken for the wrong reasons. It must be mended and you must make a final *Sam Robertson Live Report* in order for it to happen.”

Sam’s face registered a mixture of confusion and frustration. “What do you mean?”

“You are sad. Your heart is diseased. You wish to live longer than what your heart should allow. You wish this because of love—for the pleasure of living with your beloved Joy. No?”

“Yes...” Sam stammered. “But how do you know all this?” He stared directly up into the congenial, sympathetic but strong face of his guide, genuinely seeking an answer.

“I am known as ‘*the Friend*’ to those I serve. I want you to look over there.” The man pointed off into the distance.

“Okay,” Sam replied, his gaze following the flight of the man’s outstretched arm. “I’m

looking. Now what?" He turned to face the sturdily built man, but he had vanished. "Hello? Hey! This isn't funny anymore!" he called to the air around him.

Once again he turned in the direction the man had pointed. There before him, just down the hill and skirting the road, now stood the largest of the white-washed structures. And suddenly, flashing into his mind as though scrolling on a Times Square marquee, came the distinct words:

*Seek for one Cleopas, husband of Mary, a disciple and one of those called to assist the twelve. Grant him an interview, and also his request. You may yet be healed, Samuel. To return to your beloved Joy you must first make your report to a world in desperate need of healing.*

Sam shook his head, hoping to dislodge the cobweb of dream or drug-induced vision that had infiltrated it. Clearly, he was not in a hospital recovery room.

*Others enter the garden and stay,* the same voice abruptly whispered to him. Sam bolted, turned, expecting to see him; the large man, his guide. *Fulfill your mission here. Do your report, and you shall have both what your heart requires and longs for.*

Sam looked down at the blanket of sand that lay beneath his feet. When he nudged at it with the toe of his sandal, several grains flicked up and lodged between his toes. Reaching down to brush the sand away, he now became aware of his hands and, bringing them to his face, he mopped away the moisture beading on his brow. It was then, in that very moment, he determined to see this through and do as the stranger—*this friend*—would ask.

Preferring now to wake up in the sterile post-op recovery room—whatever he was experiencing, be it hallucination or dream—he had no choice but to go through it and not around.

## CLEOPAS OF EMMAUS

“Hello! Anyone home?” Sam knocked on the rough-hewn cedar door. It creaked open. “Hello?”

“Shalom, stranger. What brings a Roman nobleman to our tiny village on this Sabbath evening?” a shallow but husky voice called out from deep within the eerily empty room.

The drawn face of a large, middle-aged bearded man greeted Sam from a darkened corner of the cavern-like room. Lit only by the faint glow of a candle on one end of an innkeeper’s table and the glowing embers from a smoldering fire in the stone hearth, the diffused rays of light from the dancing flames caused a shadow to leap from the man. A giant apparition, the image spread across the wall and ceiling before him.

Sam figured he might as well play along with whatever experience he was having. Recalling the name given him moments before, he blurted out, “I seek one called Cleopas. Do you know him?”

“I am Cleopas of Emmaus,” the man answered glumly. “What brings a Roman, such as you, sir, to our humble inn—refreshment for your journey to the coast or lodging?”

“You call me Roman. Is it apparent?” answered Sam, glancing down at his fine linen toga.

“Ha! You are playing with my mind. Please, sir, I am far too weary for that.”

*Strange place...man...dream.* He decided to push the experience along, since it wouldn’t disappear on its own. “I have come to learn something of you,” he found himself saying.

“You speak Aramaic well,” answered Cleopas as he arose to greet Sam formally. “A Roman, come to learn something of a Jew, at a lowly trading route inn? But then again, you wouldn’t be the first. An innkeeper hears many strange things from guests. You are a detective of the court, of course. Are you not?”

“Detective? No. I want to know what’s going on, you know, here in...”

“Emmaus? This village? Nothing happens in Emmaus. But Jerusalem? That is another matter.”

“Yes. So, answer me...let’s get this nightmare out of the way. Tell me about the man they called Jesus of Nazareth. He lived here long ago, yes?” Sam asked; unaware that he was speaking anything but his Jersey-born English. He pawed at the sash wrapped about his waist and found a leather bag filled with coins and a rolled document of some sort.

“Dream! And a terrible one at that,” the man stammered in reply. “Ha! A spy! You came here to deceive me!”

“Not a spy,” Sam countered.

“Oh! So, you, a Roman, are so utterly unaware, uneducated of matters in this land,” the big man sarcastically rejoined.

“I have money...and this,” Sam said holding the scroll out for the Hebrew to see.

“I do not need money to talk about the Master,” Cleopas exclaimed, “but I am interested in that document.” He lifted a hand to cradle it, unrolled it gently, and by oil lamp, quickly perused it. “Written in Latin and Greek,” he observed, “but not our tongue of Palestine. No matter. You will present this to only the most educated, I presume.”

“Yes,” Sam answered without hesitation.

“So, you are Samuel Antonius, a nobleman of Sicilia, and a representative of the Library of the Senate in Rome?”

Sam, though his brain was spinning in uncertainty, offered the slightest nod. He had changed his last name to Robertson soon after he entered the news business. Somehow his father’s anglicized Italian surname, “Anthony” just didn’t carry like the sturdy sounding All-American “Robertson;” his mother’s maiden name.

“You are a member of the Antonius family of politicians, no doubt,” Cleopas went on. “You are not *the* Senator Antonius, the one who supports so liberally the Sanhedrin treasury and Caiaphas, the Sadducee High Priest of the Temple?”

“No.”

“Here is the seal of the Senator,” Cleopas pressed.

“Yes, indeed. So it is,” Sam replied. *Less is more*, he reminded himself. He knew enough to keep silent. *Besides this is a dream that will wander where it wants to go*, he assured his mind.

“Well, you must be the family ambassador, or his seal would not appear on this document,” Cleopas muttered in self-talk, though loud enough for Sam to realize the role he

would be playing in this drama within a drama: indeed, he would play the part of an observer.

“Just an interested citizen of the world, as the document claims. I am not at liberty to say more,” Sam found himself declaring.

“The Hebrew name, Samuel; curious. Perhaps that would explain also the favors of the Senator to our Jewish High Priest and his clan,” Cleopas mumbled. “A shrewd man, naming his kinsmen for Hebrew prophets. It is said he plays Herod Antipas against the powerful High Priest. You are his brother, then? Kin, surely,” Cleopas pressed, rising from his seat.

“Of Senator Antonius and his dealings—I wish to speak of him no further,” Sam adroitly countered. “All I can say at this time is that my journey has brought me from far across the sea. A man told me to come and seek you out. So, I am here. Will you help me?”

Sam had exhausted his reasons for finding himself standing before this stranger who, seemingly, had stepped out of Cecil B. DeMille’s award-winning movie, *The Ten Commandments*. He must carefully tailor his words to meet the situation. He would speak truthfully, but would be obliged to obscure who he really was. He only hoped the man would cease his inquisitive probing so this whole vision—this surgery-induced nightmare—might end.

Cleopas sized his guest up and down as he paced the floor, thoughtfully stroking his whiskered chin. Finally, he pulled up short in front of Sam and stated, “I have nothing to lose by telling a respected Roman citizen what I know. I am already a lost man. If you are a spy of Rome and reporting to the judges of the Sanhedrin, so be it. If you are here on an errand of Procurator Pilate, so be it as well. I am a disciple and have nothing to hide,” he firmly announced.

“I was orphaned as a young lad by the fever sickness that swept our land in my eighth year,” he continued. “When my parents died, I was raised by an uncle in Bethlehem, not far from here. It was there I first learned the innkeeper’s trade. And it was there I lost my soul...”

His voice trailed off and his head bowed in a mixture hopeless anguish. After some time, he resumed his story. “My wife’s name is Mary, also one who has suffered great slander for being a disciple’s wife—may God bless her name forever.”

“Yes, may God bless her,” Sam responded, surprising himself at his words. Then he peered around the room. “Can you tell me why things are so quiet?”

“You are a stranger indeed to Judea, or you continue your ruse,” Cleopas muttered, shaking his head. “No matter. I will tell you. It is still the Sabbath. At the going down of the sun,



the sixth hour, a caravan protected by a Roman Centurion, a man known for his kindness to the Jews and a sympathizer to our cause, will pass by. The roads are not safe for travelers who venture on their own after sundown.

“I leave for Jerusalem, and there will abide with one called Simon. He is awaiting word from me on some important matters. I serve as a relay of messages being conveniently passed along on this trade route to the Caesarea and the sea. My Roman friend also carries messages for delivery as a favor to the brethren. I mustn’t delay. If you wish to know more of my Master, you are welcome to travel with us then.”

“*Simon?*” Sam slipped verbally at the shock of the sudden recognition. “Simon Peter!”

“Yes, Simon known also by the name Peter in the Greek tongue. You *are* a spy then,” Cleopas scowled. “Do you not weary in your persecutions?”

Sam felt himself stiffen at this latest accusation. “I am no spy, sir,” he repeated—the words issuing from his lungs in rather clipped, staccato bursts. It was then that everything changed for Sam; he suddenly felt wholly engrossed in this dreamy drama.

“Certainly,” Cleopas huffed, spurning the Gentile’s attempt at a ruse. “By the way—” he added, his tone turning sarcastic, “You came here alone, on foot from the coast?”

A lilting smile creased Sam’s lip. “I had a special conveyance,” he offered simply.

“You are a mysterious man, Samuel Antonius. You have hardly a soiled spot on your garments. To have walked far, it would be apparent, and you would have a day-sack or bag with you. But here you are, at my door, appearing from nowhere. Strange. Very strange, indeed—if, that is, you are not a spy.”

“Indeed,” Sam muttered under his breath, then aloud for Cleopas to hear, “As you say, it is mysterious. I do my best work under those circumstances.”

## EN VINO VERITAS

“Well, mystery man or not, spy or no, you must be hungry sir,” Cleopas noted, slightly less suspicious. “I have no fear of you now,” he added, shaking his head in obvious sadness. Then, almost inaudibly, he muttered in self-condemning afterthought, “Would that I had gone myself...”

The innkeeper motioned Sam to take a spot near the fire’s embers, still smoldering in the stone hearth. “I will have a healthy portion of Passover lamb served to you. Sariah?” he called out.

A young woman, perhaps eighteen years of age, appeared from the room behind the wall where the fire blazed. Modestly dressed in loose-fitting gown, she smiled and bowed respectfully, shyly, toward Cleopas’s guest.

“Pleased to meet you,” Sam offered.

“Shalom. Peace be to you as well, sir,” she answered.

“Daughter, this is Samuel Antonius of Rome. Will you please bring him something to eat, and our best wine, most recently pressed.”

“Yes, father,” Sariah nodded courteously and returned to what Sam presumed was a kitchen area.

“A fair child. Do you have other children?” Sam inquired.

“We had others, but the sword of sickness took our only son from us when he was a tender-aged child of two years. I have a married daughter who lives in Bethany, and this girl, Sariah, the joy-song of my heart. She is betrothed to wed a Galilean later in the month, a young lad now living in Jerusalem. One named John Mark.”

*John Mark*, Sam mused. “A Galilean? Wasn’t Jesus, whom you call *Master*, a Galilean?”

Cleopas’s countenance shifted with the ease of a feather carried on a gentle breeze. “He was a Galilean prophet, yes. But the early morning hours, day before yesterday, the High Priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had Procurator Pilate question him. They accused him of treason, punishable by death. I could not be there to stand up for my Lord. No,” he spat out in bitter self-

loathing, “I was here at the inn, as usual, caring for my precious shekels and guests!”

“So did they...” Sam started.

“Execute him?” Cleopas asked with reddened eyes. “Crucify him?” he offered in rhetorical tone. “I have heard from returning guests that three men were executed. Some say he was. But I cannot believe it. No! I must not believe it until the Centurion reports it. From his own voice, then...”

“I am sorry Cleopas. I am against such capital punishment myself. Lock a man away, throw away the key if you must, but execution must be reserved for killers, murderers, not self-appointed teachers or Messiahs.”

“He was no self-appointed teacher!” Cleopas shot back. “Nor was he self-appointed to be the Messiah! I, myself, heard from the very lips of a shepherd who, the night of the holy birth—the very night I turned the newborn Master into the cold! I heard from Elias; a devout man not given to drink nor guile. He who guarded the temple flocks; those pure lambs bound for sacrifice! He and his hired herdsmen were given to hear the joyous sounds of heavenly choirs!”

Cleopas once more took to pacing the plank floor. Earnest, he expounded on the blessed event. “Yes, it was so! They heard angels sing! A shepherd, a mere boy, witnessed one of the angels descend from heaven! A lad, mind you. Children do not lie! And there was the new star. A sign in the heavens! Even my dull eyes saw that! No, you cannot understand. I do not condemn anyone for it. I cannot even describe it. So many witnesses... You are simply...”

“Uninformed?”

“Yes,” Cleopas rejoined sullenly. “If they did execute him in your typically barbarous Roman fashion, then my dear sweet Mary, she must have seen it.” Cleopas pressed his fingers to his weary eyes to squeeze at the moisture flooding them. “My Mary was there, residing in Bethany with the man’s mother of the same name and one also of Magdala—a favored name for women so blessed to have been so loved and esteemed by our Master. My Mary is yet in Jerusalem and awaits me. She had more courage than I,” he stammered.

Then he pounded the table with his fist and looked up in hopes of finding solace from something unseen, to no avail. Tears came freely now as he strode the floor in anguish and fretted over some unspeakable, unfathomable incident.

Sam paused, taking it all in. He was angry at himself for not having listened to Joy—not

having studied the Bible more. He knew the story in general, but all these players in the drama; their names, their various roles—he was unsure how it all fit together.

To Sam’s relief, Cleopas raised his head and made the first move. “You know of the events of this past week? I would be very surprised if you had not heard.”

“I know of the feast called the Passover, which brings many thousands to Jerusalem, and I have heard tales of disturbances made by the man Jesus... A Zealot, I believe?”

Cleopas just stared at Sam in disbelief. Then he let out a laugh, followed by a sarcastic chuckle and a disdainful shake of the head. One last peculiar mournful chortle issued from his chest, as he wiped at his sleep-deprived eyes.

“I am sorry, Samuel, my spying friend. You must try another profession,” he mocked. “Oh, it is good to laugh,” he added. “You must not think I am making you out to be a fool or I am of a light heart because of my laughter. It is so strange to meet one as yourself. So Roman, yet if not a spy, then so innocent.” He paused; his gaze still hovering over his guest. “Perhaps innocent is not the correct word. Why should I be surprised that, as a newcomer to this land, you are so poorly-versed.”

“Father? Where shall I place the victuals?” the sweet voice of Sariah broke in.

Cleopas pointed to a spot on the rock hearth next to Sam. “And the wine. Don’t forget a cup and a flask, sweet child.”

“Yes, father.” She set down the steaming wooden bowl and went to bring the cup and flask of freshly squeezed wine.

“*Ignorant*. You wanted to use the word *ignorant*,” Sam offered with a smile. He examined the bowl of lamb, herbs and pita-style flat bread, wondering where to start.

“Eat. Eat,” Cleopas urged, and with a chuckle added, “My heart has been heavy. You, somehow, have brought amusement to me. Like from another world...”

Sam raised his eyebrows as if to confirm the innkeeper’s statement. “Now, where are the forks and knives,” he mumbled. Once again, he glanced up at Cleopas, who urged him on. “Picnic style,” he muttered, attempting to scoop up a piece of meat with the unleavened bread.

“You Romans and your metal utensils. You must always stab at something. Wait...” Cleopas chuckled softly as he made his way to the back room, moments later to return with his hand outstretched. “Here you are. A two-pronged silver device I offer to Romans passing

through. *To your health*, as the Latins say. Now, where were we?”

“My ignorance. About people and things in Palestine,” Sam mumbled through a grateful mouthful of food. “Either this is good or I am very hungry and don’t give a... Uh, I mean I don’t mind at all.”

“Yes, that word, *ignorance*. It must not be considered for slander alone. If one does not know the state of affairs, then he should become informed. While you eat, and while we wait for the *Friend* to appear with the answer to the offer I made Pilate, I shall take the blight of ignorance from your soul called Roman.”

Sam wondered at Cleopas’ usage of the *friend*... “I’m all ears,” Sam finally replied as he broke bread before the fire. He watched his host pace the floor, the hearth’s glow casting a giant-like shadow of the man against the far wall, a shadow that now danced theatrically; one not so beaten and down as it had been when this Cleopas first greeted him an hour before.

“Very well, then,” Cleopas began. “As you know, we have a Roman governor appointed by Tiberius Caesar himself and procurator by the name Pontius Pilate. He is a stern man, swift to anger but slow to rule directly over the Jews.” He bent towards Sam as if sharing a secret, he wanted no one to overhear. “I have made him an offer,” he whispered. “Yesterday. To spare the life of the Master. I have saved regularly for the day in which I should reclaim my dignity. The *Friend* brings the answer. Surely Pilate would not execute a man when such a ransom is offered?” Cleopas stepped back and, with a look of concern, held his arms out and hunched his shoulders. Clearly, he was hoping Sam, this Roman stranger, would see the logic of his offering. *Would he?* he seemed to be asking.

Sam replied with a shrug, a gaze of non-commitment.

“Well, then,” Cleopas started again. “This Pilate, he prefers to keep the peace by turning over all matters of Jewish legal concern to the consideration of another heretic who, ironically, calls himself King of the Jews. Yet, as you know, the man is not even of Jewish birth.

“He is one called Herod Antipas. Herod, after his father of vaunted pride and arrogance called Herod the Great, a murderous madman who reigned with blood and terror for more than 30 years. This same Herod murdered his own wife and two sons born of her, solely because he had heard a rumor of a plot! A rumor, mind you! Of him, Caesar Augustus said it was better to be a pig in the house of Herod than a son. So was the character of the first Herod. But then,

surely, you know of this history,” Cleopas concluded confidently as he strode back across the hardwood floor of the inn.

“Of course. Herod the Great and his son the current King, Antipas. Well known in Rome,” Sam answered.

“This father of the one called Antipas, who despite his iniquities, rebuilt Solomon’s temple at the sacred place in Jerusalem; the first temple having been destroyed by the Babylonians in Jeremiah’s day six hundred years ago. Do I bore you with this history, Samuel?”

Sam wagged his head. “Fascinating,” he answered, glancing around the table for napkins, his fingers raised from his bowl of food.

“Forgive me. Here is a bowl of water for your hands,” Cleopas apologized. He reached under the table to retrieve a washing dish. “My daughter did not intentionally...”

“No need. Please. I understand. You were saying.”

Cleopas easily slipped back into his account. “This Herod, the elder, was murderous, but as equally villainous is his present-day adulterous namesake, that Herod who sits now on the puppet throne. This Herod Antipas, a glorified tax collector for Rome, shares a kingdom with his brother Phillip, a Tetrarch of Perea, whose wife he stole and took for his own.

“Between these two villains, a false state of Israel—a nation that merely imitates the ancient one under King David—exists at the pleasure of your Caesar Tiberius. And now these two crafty fiends who sit upon thrones made by your Rome, piously call upon our own High Priests to rule in a way they never could, and they know it very well. The real rulers are the Priests of the Sanhedrin.

“Hebrews follow one God, Yahweh. And they follow only a King who should be anointed by a prophet of God himself, as was Saul and David the Bethlehemite of old times. That prophet bore your very name!” Cleopas delightedly exclaimed as he paced the floor.

“The ancient prophet Samuel anointed kings, by command of God. Now that is how we should be ruled. God calls, a prophet anoints, and the man rules according to God’s desires, not his own. But, alas, there have been no prophets until John called the Baptist, whom Herod caused to be beheaded some two years ago for speaking out against him. So, you can see the sorry state of affairs we of Israel are in with no legitimate ruler or king.”

Sam gave a slight nod of the head. “Kings come and go, Cleopas. The Caesars

themselves manipulate their ‘godhood’ status. Everyone in Rome knows that. As for your prophets...it sounds like a nice system, but impractical. Power and the lust for it are the only driving forces that has ever sustained politicians, kings, and their thrones.”

“I fear that you are at least correct in the latter case,” Cleopas granted. “But men must trust God. And He has used the prophets very effectively through the centuries. Alas, it is us, the children of God, who give no heed to their words. The system, as you call it, and the prophets, must not be blamed. We fail God’s plan for us, not the other way around.”

“As you say,” Sam allowed, beckoning Cleopas to continue.

“Now the High Priests. They are politicians of another ilk. Many, though not all, use God to cover their sins and gratify their pride. To make matters worse, they govern the people upon a foundation of more than six hundred laws set up under Moses’ rule; laws put in place to guide the people toward obedience until they finally reached the light of God itself. Once you can see the light of God for yourself, the rules, laws, all of it becomes unnecessary. The light teaches you how to live, behave, and one so blessed desire only to do it. Of course, I would be stoned by the Pharisees for saying so.”

“I see,” Sam nodded, pulling at the flatbread, and dipping the smallest morsel in the bowl.

“Israel at the time was a rebellious people, slaves who had been in exile in Egypt for so many hundred years that they had forgotten their God,” the innkeeper went on. “They literally had to be taken by the hand and led out of captivity by the prophet Moses. The Mosaic law guaranteed that the people would obey. Moses took their very hand—and feet too—guiding them in a straight and narrow path. His law gave them discipline, that which they lacked. The law held them to a path with the purpose of leading them to see their full potential and, in time, to gain a spiritual-based obedience so that they would recognize their Messiah when He appeared.”

Sam strained at his knowledge from so many interviews with Rabbis and Christian priests to keep up. “It is all very interesting. I have heard of this but never like you relate. Go on,” Sam urged.

“Now the High Priest Caiaphas, along with his father-in-law Annas—himself a former presiding High Priest of the Sanhedrin—have created a power base in Judea upon which Herod depends for peace to exist in the land. As long as there is peace, Rome is happy and Herod’s

position is secure. Do you follow me on this, Samuel?”

“Indeed,” Sam answered, thinking back on all the crafty politicians he had interviewed over the past thirty-five years. “Things don’t change much, do they?” he murmured, draining the last droplet of wine from his flask.

“I am afraid they do not. If I didn’t believe what the Master had said about his very imminent return in glory, I fear one thousand, two thousand years from now, we may not see much improvement—so stubborn and self-serving is mankind. But then the world could never last that long with the wickedness, warfare, and corruption that abounds. It would self-destruct long before then,” Cleopas mused aloud.

Sam spewed the last trickle of wine he was swallowing, then coughed and choked as if something had lodged in his wind pipe. Cleopas hurried to him. Patting his back somewhat vigorously, he asked, “The wine is too strong? Perhaps I have not paid close enough attention...”

“Just thinking,” gasped Sam when he’d caught his breath. “I’m fine.” He waved his hand, a signal of reassurance. “Go ahead...please.”

“More wine.” Cleopas again hurried to the back room, leaving Sam to ponder on all that had transpired since he was rushed to the hospital what seemed just hours ago.

“Here. Drink,” Cleopas insisted.

“*En vino veritas*,” Sam mumbled in reply, taking in a sweet sip of the pure, fresh wine.



*Dreams.* The stuff of the imagination liberally mixed with his final conscious thoughts before drifting off into surgery land. A guest on one of his shows a year or two earlier had come with a panel of experts aimed at dissecting his audience's dreams. "*Dreams are the hidden things of the subconscious mind,*" he'd said. "*Symbols, drama, our deepest yearnings are the stuff of dreams.*"

"Samuel? Samuel," his host's voice gently urged, disrupting the gaggle of thoughts swirling about Sam's mind. "I'm sorry for disturbing your reverie. You were many lands away from this place, yes?"

"Oh...yes. Indeed, Cleopas."

"Here you are. More drink." He poured. Sam eagerly drank. "Forgive my rudeness. Perhaps it is in *vino veritas*, as you say; 'in wine the truth.' I have had so much on my mind this day and night. And you—as if sent from God in this my hour of distress—have come to my house, spy or not, and allowed me to talk—to forget my woes. I have failed you; I fear."

"No, you certainly have not. I admire your hospitality. The wine is very good, by the way. Very good," he repeated.

"More?"

"Yes, please. There is little or no fermentation?"

"I never allow that. It yields nothing but mischief, evil, and foolish behavior from my guests. This is freshly pressed, new wine, stored in earthen jars for your refreshment."

"Thank you," Sam smiled, raising his free hand, signaling for Cleopas to stop pouring. "I don't believe I've ever tasted wine quite like this."

"Then you have never heard my Master's voice," Cleopas sighed, as he began to nervously pace once more. "As I was saying about the many laws of Moses," he continued, "there are laws for washing pots and cups, laws for how many steps one may take on the Sabbath, and laws piled on top of laws, until Moses' original ten have now stretched to over six hundred. The people must obey, or they cannot please God. Their minds," he said tapping on his

own covered head, “are so blinded by every Pharisaical prerequisite of worship that they never look up to the sky. If the Messiah came in the clouds, how would they know it? In truth, I tire of it all.” Cleopas brought his fingers down over his heart, still tapping lightly. “It is here,” he said, “where the law must reside, and that law is love. It is the heart, Sam. It is the heart that gives life to laws, and love to life.”

Sam gave a nod. “Profound. Profound indeed. We have a Latin saying in Rome, ‘*omnia vincit amor.*’ *Love conquers all.* Now I have heard a master tell me why that is so,” he said by way of a compliment.

“You must never call me that.”

“What?”

“Master. There is but one Master and one True Shepherd. And I have failed him—” his voice broke. The palm of his right hand now came down hard on his sternum with a sharp crack. “From the first time I turned Him away as a babe until today,” he sobbed, “I—Cleopas of Bethlehem failed Him.”

“Bethlehem? You are a man of Emmaus who is very hard on himself.”

“I once denied my God.”

“But how?” Sam implored. “You appear quite devoted.”

“I certainly do not believe as the rulers, but...” He shook his head, ashamed. “There was no room,” Cleopas muttered. “No room at the inn, I told my Master’s mother and her husband. I claimed that I had no room for them that night—that night of nights just over thirty-three years ago. Ha!” he mournfully exclaimed. “I sold the prospect of housing the Son of the Highest for two silver coins. Two! Oh, Samuel, you cannot understand what a fool that makes me! I have lived a lie my entire life.”

“At this inn?” Sam asked in surprise. “What lie?”

“No. I was the owner of a small but orderly inn many years ago. It failed miserably. Then it burned to the ground in suspicious circumstance during the great slaughter of the children. Bethlehem... Awful... Shameful... I came here after that. I deserved it all, but the children...their sweet innocence taken so cruelly by Herod’s soldiers!”

*It was just a Bible story,* Sam reasoned in a mind clearly trying to grasp what this ethereal innkeeper was recounting.

“I am sure even you are aware that Herod—the one called ‘the Great,’ and father to our present ruler—was a ruthless and wicked man,” Cleopas continued, breaking Sam’s trance. “He fretted much over the tales of several men of wisdom who had traveled from eastern lands. Indeed, they stopped by my very inn soon after the Holy child’s birth. These wise magi, as some termed them, inquired as to the sacred birth of Jesus, for they had seen a proscribed sign in the heavens, long foretold as the sign marking the birth of the Messiah of Israel. They brought treasures—gifts to give to him.

“Herod’s scribes unearthed the prophecies that told of a child to be born ruler of Israel, in the City of David, the city named after our beloved and first true king of Israel. The prophecy clearly stated that Bethlehem would be the site of his taking a mortal body; thus, the Messiah child came into the world.

“The wise men called the babe ‘King of Israel’ to Herod’s face. When Herod’s ego burdened him with the thought of another replacing him, he ordered the children of Bethlehem—all those appearing under two years of age—to be murdered by the sword! And, indeed, after the departure of the three wise men, came the slaughter.”

Cleopas clasped his head in his hands, his palms pressing against his ears. “By that time, I was at least smart enough to provide better housing for the holy family who fled one night to Egypt when warned of an angelic visitor.

“I still hear the cries of the mothers, and see the bloody swords! You cannot imagine! The horror, the wailing... for days and days it continued! I was almost relieved when my inn burned to the ground. My beloved Mary and I barely escaped with our lives!”

Sam had sat still as stone through the entire tale, allowing the hush of reverence for the telling of the nativity story to go unbroken. He easily recalled the account; the narrative repeated annually across the Christian world. *So, this was the one who turned Joseph and Mary away.*

He supposed that if he were concocting this dream, it would at least need this dramatic element—the tortured groans of a nameless innkeeper, a man so reviled by Christians for centuries. He waited quietly to hear what Cleopas would reveal next.

“Only this,” he pointed above the door, “survived the flames, as if by miracle of God!” Sam gazed up at the carefully honed, Lebanese cedar wood plaque above the door; leather cords leading from it to a peg driven into the wall above. The words inscribed by a carpenter’s chisel

had survived intact, though they still bore scorch marks from the fire.

“Joseph, the Carpenter from Nazareth, had made it a gift for my uncle Simeon when he came to visit Bethlehem as a lad. I have often wondered...” His voice trailed off.

“Wondered what?” Sam asked eagerly, hoping Cleopas’s reenactment hadn’t come to a premature end.

“I have wondered... *If I had let Mary and Joseph take my room that night... If I had slept in the stable. Would the touch of the newborn Master have saved it from burning?*”

“What do the words say?” Sam asked, intrigued.

Cleopas responded in thoughtful but distant tone. “This gift, the plaque here above the door, is a greeting to those coming and going. These words are from the nameless ‘Preacher,’ as he is known to us. From the Koheleth, the Hebrew reads...

*Go thy way, eat and drink with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God now accepteth thy works. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest. . . for that is thy portion in this life.*

“Cleopas?” Sam ventured, humbled by the words, as well as the sentiments of loving his wife, and God’s acceptance of a man’s works.

“Yes,” the sullen man answered.

“Those are beautiful words. May I copy them in my own native tongue? I do not have pen... paper...” he said, voice trailing off. “A what-do-you-call-it; a writing instrument and, uh... parchment. That’s it. Do you have something for me to jot them down with?”

Cleopas returned a blank expression. “Jot them down? You have a strange manner of speaking. You wish to have these words?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. I do not read Hebrew and I would appreciate very much putting those words in my language, above my door someday. I miss my wife, and...”

“Then it is yours. You may take this,” Cleopas said as he reached above the entry door,

intent to remove the sign.

“Oh, no! Cleopas—I would have to earn something so precious. I couldn’t. I...”

“I insist.”

Sam held up his hand to stop him.

“You truly wish to earn this, then?”

“Yes.”

“You are a stubborn man, Samuel Antonius. I have one thing more precious to me than these words and what it represents.”

“What is that?” Sam asked.

“My good name!” he cried. “I will be forever known as the first mortal to reject the King of Israel!” Cleopas loudly mourned. “Can you imagine how that makes me feel? How may I redeem myself?” Cleopas let out a muffled moan.

Sam shuddered upon hearing Cleopas’ plea. Though soft and brief, it issued from deep within; from a sadness that reached to the man’s very core.

“I must find a way to report the truth to the world,” Cleopas continued. “I imagine going back in time and being wiser. I pray for someone to...” He stopped. Turning slowly, he fixed his gaze on Sam, deep in thought. Then a smile creased his lips as a sudden revelation opened itself to him. His expression shifted from dour to vibrant. “Yes! You could do that for me! You are powerful!”

“Do what, Cleopas?”

“You, a man who knows the libraries where the words are made and kept, and you, from the most powerful nation on this earth!”

*If he only knew*, Sam thought, nodding in agreement but remaining silent.

Cleopas paced with nervous energy as if a grand discovery of enormous consequence had just opened to him. “Would you consider it, Samuel Antonius? I shall give this most rare and precious object to you, with one request. You may indeed earn the plaque above the entry to this humble inn!”

“How?”

“Make a report. Tell the world I did not betray Him! And I shall deliver to you the single remaining miracle from the day of our Savior’s birth in Bethlehem!”

Cleopas strode back across the room and sat across the table from his guest, locking his moist and tired eyes with Sam's. "If the plaque be not enough, then everything I have, all my earthly possessions are yours for this one thing I ask." His head bowed in humble acceptance of the rejection he expected to receive. "You are busy, of course," he muttered almost inaudibly.

Sam's inner ear reverberated with the voice from the now invisible guide from the hospital: *Grant him an interview, and also his request. You may yet live.*

"I'll do it," Sam cheerily offered. "This will make a great Sam Robert... uh, Samuel Antonius report."

Cleopas slowly raised his head, once again fixing his gaze on Sam. "You are not mortal. Samuel, you surely are an answer to my prayers. Angels come disguised... Are you...?" Cleopas stood and again respectfully bowed his head.

Sam chuckled aloud at the very thought. "I assure you," he said, "those who know me would not liken me to an angel. Far from it. And I will earn that plaque and those words with my report."

The innkeeper's eyes welled up anew. "Oh, Samuel!" he gasped. "You are a friend, indeed. A blessing! May God forever bless you, your house and wife!" Cleopas reached across the table and grasped Sam's hands in his thanking him.

"Cleopas?" Sam interrupted while clearing his throat.

"Yes?"

"Are you for real?" Sam expected the question to burst the bubble of a surgery-induced fantasy, or to convince himself that something beyond the natural realm was in control after all.

"Sadly, I am real," he allowed, lapsing into his former melancholy almost as suddenly as the cloud of despair had been lifted at Sam's acceptance of the offer. "But at times it all seems like a nightmare. If only I had given up the room. I turned them away! Then the killing started. Oh Samuel...I am a condemned man!" he cried out, pacing, wringing his hands, his eyes now and again flitting toward the door in desperation. "But you will help clear my name. At least I have that hope! Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The one we call *Friend*." Cleopas stopped near a window and peered through a half-closed shutter, hoping to see the Roman band approaching.

The *'friend,'* Sam wondered. Once before he had heard the title. The man at the hospital referred to himself as...

"Where is he?" fretted the innkeeper. "What is keeping him?" He moved to the door. Cracking it open, he gazed up the dusty road leading toward Jerusalem.

"Cleopas," Sam interjected. "You said babies were killed. I had thought it a fabrication, surely a legend. I had heard of it, but I could not believe... no man would... it doesn't seem reasonable..." Sam stuttered. "I thought it was a Bible story..."

Cleopas stopped pacing and turned to face Sam. Sternly and with emphasis placed on each word, he intoned, "I assure you it was not! As for *bible*, I know of no such place or thing."

"Stories from a book... a compendium of books actually..." Sam paused, stumped at how to explain it all. He pictured himself the playwright of his own production. Yet this player—this actor before him—he seemed so tangible, so heart-broken, so...*real*.

This nocturnal illusion of mind and imaginings was no doubt the realization of a lifetime of doubts ebbing to the surface. It was the holiday season, after all. *And after what I told Cardinal McIntyre about interviewing everyone but God himself...*

"Samuel?"

He heard his name called. But it was distant.

"Samuel," the voice demanded. It was a voice coming from somewhere beyond these walls—felt more than audibly heard. "Are you awake, Samuel?"

Joy often called him *Samuel* when she was worried or angry. "Focus!" he now commanded himself.

"Sam. Wake up. Sam!"

Like a vortex eliminating the native gravitational forces of reality—this psychological drama had replaced familiar life by swallowing the surroundings of home, real people, the hospital.

He thought he was hearing the voice more clearly now. Cleopas, his imaginary friend had suddenly vanished.

"Samuel? Sam... Come on now, honey. Are you in there?"

## FIFTY-FIFTY

“Doctor Gray, why won’t Sam wake up? Did the surgery go well? It’s been 24 hours. Surely the anesthetics would have worn off. What if he...?”

“Joy,” the doctor broke in. “Something like this can be very traumatic. I don’t mean to alarm you, but let’s look on the bright side. He’s alive. There was, after all, a 50/50 chance,”

“Sam, honey,” she called out as she leaned over him. Sam, come on,” she pled. “I know you can hear me.” He lay comatose in the critical care unit. His only answer to her was a machine-monitored vital sign indicating his newly rebuilt heart was pumping—albeit weakly—on its own, but breathing was still aided. Tubes ran from every opening in his body, both to feed him and eliminate poisons and waste.

“He’s so white, so pale, so...deathly. Is that normal?” Joy asked, the hint of control in her voice quickly giving way to a deep sobbing. “I love him. It can’t be...”

*I love you too, baby,* he thought back. Unable to open his eyes, her voice so far away and faint, yet Sam knew she was with him. He struggled to say or do something to let her know.

Doctor Gray observed Sam’s responses, shining a light into his eyes, only to find his sensory perceptions seemingly at a standstill.

“Can he come out of it? Doctor, please?” she cried.

*I’m here Joy! I’m in here! Don’t give up on me! I’m alive! Dreaming of you, baby!* he tried to say through paralyzed lips, eyes shut tight with the heaviness of a fatigue that dominated any power of self-determined control.

“Joy, it’s simply too soon,” he heard Doc Gray say. “This can go either way. I want you to get some rest. Let’s give the staff time to do what they have to and allow Sam to rest. The surgical team has done all they can. Time for love and prayers, Joy. Come, now.”

“Samuel, honey. Don’t give up,” she cooed, whispering into his ear. “I love you, Sam.” She kissed him, letting her tears tumble from her cheek to stain the pasty skin above his brow. “Sleep, darling, but wake a new man; *be whole...*for me.”



## DRAMA UNFOLDS

“Samuel? Samuel? Are you awake?” the deep voice probed.

Sam looked up from the table. He clutched the heavy goblet of wine in trembling hands. He squinted through the mental fog at his benefactor; offering no reply, just groggily peering through the heavy-lidded eyes of a man who had weathered a long, traumatic mental journey.

“Samuel Antonius. We have another guest arriving soon. I have bored you...as it appears, nearly to death. And now I fear you will think of me, as others have. That I, an innkeeper born to my trade to house the King of Heaven and earth, and a man given to tirades concerning my nation’s ills, is in a word, delusional.”

“Delusional? No,” muttered Sam. “I might be, but not you.”

“I did not hear you clearly, my friend,” Cleopas answered.

“I am your friend?” Sam asked.

“Yes. Why, yes. I feel you must be, to listen so patiently.”

Sam shrugged his achy shoulders. “I interview people. I’m used to it.”

“Sullen. So somber. Have my stories of sadness so filled you that you are overcome?”

“I miss her...”

“Ah... The woman! I understand now. A day without my Mary is like a day without air and food. I hunger for her presence even now. But soon we will be on our way to Jerusalem—as soon as the Roman friend arrives, that is. I will see my beloved there. She waits with the others. But you! You must wait to see your woman. I am sad for you, Samuel.”

“I will see this through. I only hope I can see her again. It’s so strange, this dream. You. It seems so real, yet so very, very foreign. Do you understand? You are an apparition, not real, Cleopas. This is all make-believe.”

“The wine. Perhaps it has...”

“No, the surgery! My heart! I have heart valve damage! Coronary artery disease! I am asleep and you keep waking me up! Joy... She needs me.”

Cleopas stood facing him, his mouth agape, but silent. A look of compassion swept over

him. He had learned much about the musings of lonesome guests. Far-flung travelers often became forlorn and embittered. He had heard many stories...ramblings from men far from home, isolated from loved ones, cut off from familiar surroundings.

This one though, he was different. Out of place here—dreamy, not in touch with present-day realities. In fact, Cleopas wondered if it were he, not this man, who was caught up in a dream.

The nightmare of the past two days had caused him now to awaken in a numb, petrified melancholy, even weighed down to a near death-like feeling of despair. At least this man represented a form of divergence from the gloom, a willing audience for his pent-up hopelessness. Samuel had roused within him a momentary happiness on this day of sad expectations.

“How are the rulers, then?” Sam croaked through sluggish voice. “You were speaking earlier of the rulers.” He swirled the wine in his goblet, studying the dark purple eddy created by its tiny orbit, fully aware that he may already be dead—that this was the place to which he’d been consigned for having ever doubted.

Cleopas sighed, and reached for the flask of wine. “May I share?”

“Certainly,” Sam said, as he watched Cleopas pour from the flask into a fresh goblet.

Cleopas took a healthy gulp, wiped at his mouth with his sleeve, and recommenced nervous pacing. “The beneficiaries of the people’s observance of the laws are the sect of lawyers...”

“Hah! You have lawyers here too?” Sam bellowed, disrupting Cleopas’ monologue. Then he straightened his back and bowed his head, realizing the *faux pas* he had just committed.

Cleopas frowned and shook his head. “Yes, and as I was leading to, lawyers make up the main body of priests of the Sadducee party, and some of the Pharisees who collaborate as well. It is a strange status quo. It is a two-party system. Now how can that be effective?”

“I can’t imagine,” Sam chuckled, shaking his head in acknowledgment.

“I will tell you how. They compromise. They give each to the other to help themselves stay in power and, in so doing, burden and crush the life out of the people. They compromise principle!”

“Exactly!” Sam exclaimed, unable to contain himself. “I was trying to make that very

point on my show one night with Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton!” He looked at Cleopas, who stood there totally dumbfounded by what Sam was saying. “Please, go on,” Sam motioned with a smile.

“You cause me delight, Samuel, though I don’t know why. Some for the things you say—and, for that matter, things you don’t say. But you are Roman. I must train you.” Cleopas let out an audible sigh. Then, to Sam’s amusement, he lashed out again with the seriousness of a country preacher on the serpentine nature of Jerusalem’s lawyers, ecclesiastical leaders, and politicians. “The priestly rulers conspire with Herod Antipas, whom they despise, and Antipas in turn conspires with Procurator Pilate, whom he also despises, and Pilate appeases them all to keep Tiberius happy in Rome—whom it is said, he, Pilate, despises.

“Now, the Priests grow fat on the tithes and offerings and sacrifices of the people—it is they who control the money changers at the Temple—and it is they who Jesus of Nazareth condemned more strongly than even Herod Antipas or Caesar.”

“A question of you, Cleopas,” Sam interjected. He felt himself slip into his role of reporter. This monologue was entertaining and enlightening, but it lacked objectivity.

“Why condemn the rulers for the situation? Why not blame—and forgive me, but I am gentile—the God of the Jews? After all, if, as all your prophets have taught, Israel is the chosen people, you’d think He would give them a break from all this madness, persecution, burdens, and *unholy* state of affairs.”

“Oh Samuel. You, a Roman should know of what I speak. God is for us. Do not your leaders manipulate not only the people, but each other?” Cleopas spit back.

Sam nodded in sympathy. “If this is what you call being the *chosen*, I believe I must retain my gentile sympathies.” There. Now he had lit a fire for some real answers.

Cleopas launched into a succession of long paces across the creaky, hardwood floor. Sam could sense the anger building. But then, inexplicably, it quickly subsided. The innkeeper sat back down and poured himself another cup of wine. Without doubt, Sam would enjoy the theatrics sure to follow.

“You are a proud Roman, but mean no harm,” Cleopas finally tendered, together with the release of a deeply held lung full of air. Then he pointed at Sam and accused, “You do not know of what you speak.” With that, he began stroking his beard nervously, obviously seething with

anger but then alternating with compassion for his guest's lack of understanding. "I struggle to respond to your ignorance. I do not say it to offend you. In former days I would accuse you in my heart of blasphemy, and heatedly vilify you, but now—"

"But now?" Sam asked.

"Are you truly unacquainted with events of the past days?"

"In Jerusalem?"

"You truly are without knowledge? This is not some trick designed by Herod, Caiaphas, or Pilate, perhaps, to try to trap me or the other disciples?" Cleopas wanted to trust Sam. The man's offer for Sam to tell his story to the world—help him regain his name—seemed so sincere.

Sam met the innkeeper's stare, poker-faced, waiting, and giving Cleopas the speaker's gavel. There was no need for him to interrupt the man now.

"I, Cleopas, admit my ignorance," the innkeeper continued in meek tones. "But you—you mustn't play me the fool!" he spat.

Sam nodded submissively. "I am a wealthy man where I come from," he replied. "I have spent my time in work and the pursuit of pleasure. I have never prayed to a God, because I can buy my problems away with money.

"But now, for the first time in my life I have questioned immortality. Now there is one I love, and I..." Sam's voice trailed off. "And I need to know if I will ever see her again," the words spilled out, almost reverently.

"I don't know if there is a God, or who your God really is," Sam continued. "I do not pretend to be a candidate for conversion, but I have a long history of interviewing people with hard questions; so that I might learn the truth."

Cleopas had stopped his pacing. He now gazed into Sam's eyes, long and hard. "I can read a man's face. You are sincere, but still *ignorant*."

"Ignorance is no vice, Cleopas," Sam answered. "Perhaps uninformed is more polite."

"Perhaps. I will cease to condemn you then, or seek to find any other purpose for your visit to me. And I suppose you must inquire. I will boldly and truthfully answer all your questions. I will never run again!" As to underscore his steadfastness, he struck the open palm of one hand with his fist. "I will begin by telling you of a day of days and a night of nights. It was two nights ago, and..."

## BE WHOLE!

“I cowered. I, like the others fled before the Roman guards who escorted the traitor Judas Iscariot past the Temple to the grove of trees the night before last on the eve of Passover.

“I had been gone just a short time from this inn, compelled to journey to Jerusalem to be with, and support, the Master’s followers. I was bringing victuals to the brethren who waited with Him while he prayed. Oh, they had eaten the Passover meal with the Master, but I was not invited. And why should I have been? After all, it was I who turned him away the very first time. I never expected Him to even glance my way...” he said, drifting off into silent reverie.

Sam waited. “You were bringing victuals...”

“I beg your forgiveness,” mumbled Cleopas. “Ah, yes. I was bringing more food for when they should return to the upper room; the room above the home of the young man named John Mark, and his mother.”

“You were at *The Last Supper*?” Sam blurted.

“I...the last supper?” Cleopas frowned.

“Forgive the interruption. Please continue...”

“As I was saying, I thought if I comforted the Apostles with nourishment figs, dates, bread, they might endure the day to come—the Sabbath, you know. Mark, the same young man from Jerusalem in whose house the disciples had often met, was with me. A brave lad! A very brave lad, indeed!” he sighed, bringing his hands to his head—searching the strands of memory woven the night before last and feeling the sudden pain and anguish as if a throbbing pain had overtaken him.

“But it was just an innkeeper’s mentality, to feed the gathering, to try to make up in any way for missing the hospitality I might have shown the infant child of Joseph and Mary. And I felt a keen desire to be near my Master, for I somehow knew—though did not want to believe—that he was foretelling a fate to come to himself; a certain doom that caused us all to despair.”

Sam sat respectfully quiet. This man was filling in the gaps to a story that had been told and retold countless times over the past two millennia.

“As I was saying...” Cleopas continued recounting of his Passover eve exploits in company with John Mark.

...

Both men peered across the courtyard to the open window, where the gathered disciples were listening to the Master as he broke bread for the Seder.

“You must be very quiet, John Mark” the older man said as he motioned with his finger to his lips. “This is a Passover like no other,” he assured the young follower of the Galilean.

“He looks so solemn, Cleopas,” the young man whispered. “I wish I were in there with them,” he sighed. “Why do you suppose we were not invited? He knows we are here. He has never denied us before.”

“There is something wrong,” Cleopas cried under his breath. “I feel it. I feel as if a lion is about to spring from the darkness and attack without warning.”

“There! Who is that leaving by the back steps?” Mark probed.

“Judas; probably on an errand.”

“Judas? The one who keeps the purse for the disciples... on an errand? He appears in a hurry.”

“Indeed,” Cleopas confirmed.

The two men remained in the shadows, just feet away from where the disciples, now minus one, were attending the Passover with their Rabbi. “Cleopas, why have you not stayed at your inn this night?” asked Mark. “It must be crowded with pilgrims come to celebrate the Holy Days here in Jerusalem. Are you not afraid that someone might take advantage of you while you are away?”

“Not when you have as a friend a Roman Centurion who has billeted his men for the period of the feasts. Within an easy march of the city gates, all my guests know to return each evening to guard against road thieves and villains.”

“Is he in truth a *friend*?”

“He is. Those of us who know him, know him to be a follower of our Lord. He cannot reveal his name to any save a few. Therefore, we know and call to him simply the Friend. It

would not go well with him among his Roman superiors to reveal his sympathies. But he does much for our cause and is a righteous and a just man according to all the laws of the Jews.”

“What is the Master doing now?” queried John Mark. “His manner of breaking the bread, holding it up for everyone to see...he does not dip it as when he did the with bitter herbs...”

“I do not know. He is speaking. John Mark, go to the door. Hurry. Tell me what you hear him saying.”

Mark hurried out of the room and mounted the steps beneath the open window, crouching in the shadows.

“Take, eat...” the words were soft but clear. Holding aloft the pieces of broken bread, Jesus invited each to partake. “This is my body and a new covenant...”

...

“And thus ended the supper,” sighed Cleopas, finishing the account of what Mark had both seen and heard that night. “That is what took place in that upper room, perhaps our Lord’s final Passover in this life.”

Then he slumped onto the bench next to the rough hardwood serving table and buried his head in his arms. Releasing a heavy groan, Cleopas took in a deep breath and held it inside. Sam watched; said nothing.

“I was a coward,” he muttered, unleashing the self-loathing from his lungs. “I have wept many tears over these two days for my cowardice. At least Simon stood against them. And John Mark! You should have seen him come up to be near Jesus as the guards took him; he stood just behind an olive arbor—there, ready to stand by Peter! A boy, but such a man! But I remained there in the shadows, where with mine own eyes, I saw the whole affair.”

Sam stopped him. “You saw the agony of your Master in the Garden of Gethsemane?”

“Garden? Agony? Who are you, Samuel Antonius?” Cleopas implored.

Sam did not answer, but allowed silence to become his ally.

Cleopas put his silence aside, then said, “I never thought of the orchard a garden. But, yes, I did see my Master kneel on the ground...”

In silence Sam pondered upon his next query. “You are a firsthand witness to this?” Sam asked again, taken aback by the revelation.

“You say that you have not yet been to Jerusalem—that you come from Rome directly? Yet you know the name of the grove so named for the olive press? How?”

“Books. Maps.”

“Ah yes! Your ‘books,’” Cleopas said knowingly. “Well then. You will report this account to others, no doubt?” Cleopas pursued.

“Yes, it is my profession to report. That is, with your permission.”

“Permission? I have no fears! Not any more! I will let the entire world know that the once cowardly innkeeper of Bethlehem and Emmaus was a witness to the miracle birth, and the last Passover feast before the arrest of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth! But I fear I may never be given the opportunity to clear my name, nor be that witness. I fear generations will simply revile me as the first mortal to reject the Messiah, not one of the last to save him.”

Sam knew that Cleopas’s fears were not unfounded. Insofar as the Bible account was concerned, people for two thousand years would remember the greedy innkeeper of Bethlehem, and indeed, vilify him for his avarice and cowardly lack of concern for the laboring mother of the Son of God.

The reporter laid a hand on the innkeeper’s arm. “That is why records are so very valuable. You must write it down. I will share it with the world if you do,” he promised.

“You make me a pledge? A vow?” Cleopas spoke reverently now, with hopeful and wide pleading eyes.

“If I ever get home again, I promise to share your story, and exactly as you recount it.”

“Then you must hear the rest of the tale!”

Sam nodded for him to continue.

“I followed the disciples from a discreet distant and buried myself in the shadows of the grove of trees,” Cleopas went on, at once lost in the memories of a few nights earlier. “The disciples were weary. They lay on the ground near the gate and slept. Jesus walked on several dozen paces from there, and knelt beside a large stone at the base of an ancient olive tree, one in the grove correctly called Gethsemane. I did not hear his words, but heard him moan. Then a light appeared to illuminate the area surrounding Jesus, and it would have blinded me if I had not



shielded my eyes. What it was, I cannot tell. John Mark suggested angels had come to rescue the Messiah, but I countered with, ‘Would a Messiah need angels?’

“It was not long after that, I witnessed Judas Iscariot, one of the Apostles, approaching. But before he reached us, Jesus, with garments caked to his body as if he had perspired in blood, staggered from the shadows, and gently rebuked his disciples with this saying: ‘*Canst thou not wait with me this one hour?*’

“I almost gasped aloud when I saw Him. At first, I thought someone must have attacked him while he prayed. Still, there he stood in the full moonlight, proud, tall, manly, in a majesty only he could display; a manner familiar to those of us who had seen him teach.

“Then Judas, that traitor of the twelve, kissed him on the cheek, correctly saying ‘*Master,*’ after which Jesus said, ‘*Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?*’”

Cleopas paused to draw a breath. His tender raw emotions were evident in his far-off stare. “Then the guards, with drawn sword, came forward—but not before Simon interceded. He withdrew a scabbard from his belt and struck at the man nearest him; the High Priest’s chief servant, Malcus. Malcus just stood there, stunned, and then screamed in pain as he realized his left ear had been severed from his head by Simon’s sword.

“And what I witnessed next—this would make a believer of anyone, I tell you. Simon threatened the guards and berated Judas as he positioned himself between them and the Master.

“But he, Jesus, came forward and bent to the ground to retrieve what I suppose was the ear of Malcus. When he brushed past Simon, the guards recoiled in fear, as if the Master would smite them with something mightier than a sword.

“But the Master merely stretched his hand out to touch the wounded servant of Caiaphas and said, ‘*Be ye whole,*’ and it was done! At that, Malcus fell back, caressing the side of his head with his hand. Finding no blood, and the ear restored, he wondered greatly and the crowd marveled aloud, until, that is, another man—a Priest from the Sanhedrin—commanded the guards with the words, ‘*Seize him!*’ As if the gentle Master were a threat...

“Why his robes were drenched in blood, I knew not. I have not as yet spoken with Simon. I am greatly wondering now. For when they seized the Master, we all fled. I came directly here, and have talked to no one, excepting the Roman messenger, our secret friend, who delivered the ransom notice from me to Pilate. You, now, are the only other to whom I have divulged so much

history. Strange, both of you Romans, yet I feel perfectly safe. Indeed, strange,” Cleopas concluded, yet lost in thought.

“You said something,” Sam prodded. “You said he used words to put the servant’s ear back on?”

“Yes.”

“Say them again for me, please,” Sam asked solemnly.

“He said the words, ‘*Be ye whole,*’ and then I ran like the others,” Cleopas voiced with disgust. “I abandoned him. My wife did not, nor did any of the women abandon him.”

He shook his head sadly. “Even John surnamed Mark followed the entourage with the bound Master. So fearless! But me... Ah, the greedy man I was the first time he needed me, revealed himself again. But then, coming to myself once I safely arrived here at the inn, I quickly realized my error and sent the offer of money—all that I have saved in a lifetime—with the Centurion.”

Sam offered no response. He sat, and took in the large brooding man who so easily swung from melancholy, to bold defender of the faith, and back to hospitable host.

“Oh, where is the Roman band, and my friend Centurion Cornelius?” Cleopas exclaimed. The silence of the spacious room echoed no answer.

Sam raised an eyebrow. *Friend? Centurion? Cornelius?* His thoughts shifted again. *Be ye whole*, he thought. Words Joy said were used in her childhood dream of being made well. *Be ye whole*. Words she used again moments ago at his intensive care bedside as she tried to kiss him awake. He could still hear her plea, ‘Sam, *be whole,*’ spoken with all the tenderness and faith and certainty of her being—as if it had already happened—just as it had in her healing from death’s grip as a child. Likewise, the guide, the white-robed man at the hospital after surgery, used those exact same words...

Pieces of this dreamscape puzzle were beginning to fit in place, giving Sam confidence that soon he would understand the anesthesia-induced mission forced upon him. Looking around him, Sam longed to see Joy now, wishing he had not again slipped so easily back into this dream, this death, this whatever-it-was.

He returned his attention to the innkeeper, determined to find answers to his questions—his reason for this soul-travel to a place and time he’d once deemed no more than the fanciful

fairytale and notions of those resting their faith in a God.

“You said Cornelius?” Sam offered in the ponderous quiet of the dining hall.

“Shhh,” the big Hebrew motioned to his lips as guests started filing in from their devotions in Jerusalem. “It is dusk. The Sabbath ends and the guests return from the Temple.” He signaled towards two men entering the inn and placing their belongings in a corner before taking seats at a nearby table. “Come, follow me,” he said to Sam.

Parting a curtain leading to a back room, Cleopas led Sam into a kitchen area. “Daughter,” he called out in hushed tones, “the guests arrive. Call for our help to come. Go, child. Quickly!” The young woman who had been preparing food simply nodded and slipped out a back door.

“One cannot be too careful. I must not speak of the Roman Centurion at this dangerous time. But then, I already have,” he reasoned to himself. “Well, then, Roman scribe Samuel Antonius, you will meet him soon, and no doubt you yourself may inquire of him. Soon the inn will be filled with strangers, all talking of the events of these days. I must go to the city—to Jerusalem—and, if at all possible, redeem myself of my cowardice.”

Sam was a skilled observer of human nature. Cleopas surely was one sincere person; one without guile. And this discussion he’d been having with him was as real as any of the thousands of interviews he’d done over the years. Though still convinced that the hospital anesthesia was working overtime on his mind, if he was dying, Sam reasoned, why not go out being entertained?

“Yes, his name is Cornelius,” the innkeeper whispered, pulling Sam from his reverie. “But you mustn’t mention his name if you are a true friend to us. I trust you will honor my request. And you must identify yourself as a man from Rome on an investigative journey,” Cleopas nervously announced.

“Is his name so secret that it should not be mentioned in connection with the others? With you?” Sam posed, now playing experienced journalistic reporter.

Cleopas frowned, then took to pacing; not answering directly. “Romans are hardly tolerated, much less liked. In all the confusion of the Christ, our Messiah, Cornelius was one Roman who shared his conviction with one named Simon Peter. He had seen Jesus do miracles; even heal one of his servants by the mere mention of words. But a far more sure witness resides within the Centurion; in here.” Cleopas patted the center of his chest. “He has befriended our

cause and it must not be made known of his sympathies. Not yet. Not in all the confusion of these days.”

“Cornelius is a well-known name in Rome,” Sam ventured. “A noble family,” he added with uncertainty.

“So, they say. But this one is an Iberian, being adopted at birth by one Senator Cornelius after a fearsome battle in which his parents suffered death by the hands of legionnaires.”

“So not a true nor pure Italian of Rome?”

“No, Iberian. What do the Roman dogs know of purebred races, anyway? They conquer, vanquish, intermarry. It means nothing.”

“I see. And being a Hebrew, of one race, one house, means something?”

“I must confess, you seem so terribly uninformed of the trials of God’s chosen people. How could you even ask that— unless, of course, you mean to insult me?”

“I mean no injury. It seems to me with all this talk about the Son of God, the chosen people, and a Messiah, that you of this land see him as a Savior to you alone. Was he not a man for all? If he healed the servant of a Roman Centurion then...” Sam posed. “Perhaps he was a special soul from God who came to heal more than the wounded pride of the House of Israel?” Sam finished.

“You are treading on ground you know not of, Samuel. But it surprises me; your last statement. You have perceived, in all your ignorance of our confused state of affairs, that He, Jesus of Nazareth, was really a Messiah for all. Judeans, Galileans, Samaritans! Imagine that, the despised Samaritans are being baptized and won to his cause!

“It confuses me, but the more I meet people such as the Centurion, and yourself, I think perhaps His salvation is not of this world. Oh, Jesus talked of another world, but we were eager for him to take the throne to which he rightfully could lay claim.” Cleopas paused, deep in thought, then continued. “I have not understood this clearly, mind you. But I am sensing His mission to be more than we understood. But it is lost now,” he said in a low voice. “All lost,” he repeated as he paced with head hung, pensive, and moodily solemn.

“What if I were to tell you the name of Jesus will go down as one of history’s most remarkable and revered men?”

“Ah, how? Who would think of it?”

“Perhaps millions. Perhaps hundreds of millions.”

“There are not that many Jews. Even if all of Italia, Iberia, Macedonia, Thracia, Greece, Britannia, all of the known world, were to believe his message, I hardly think...”

“Not now, but in future generations. Let us say John Mark, and the others, wrote down the stories in a book, and later the book was circulated, and someday the book were to be made available to every household. Then?”

“Such nonsense. A book? This new word you continue to use... Scrolls are not kept in such quantities. I admire your creative thought. But as a librarian of the Senate, I suppose you must think in such possibilities. No, my Roman friend. This is the end of a bright flame, a flame of hope that has now been snuffed out before it could begin to burn in the bosoms of the millions you speak of. Like so much chaff is blown to the wind during threshing time, our dreams are scattered too.”

He strode the floor more vigorously. With the tide of melancholy coursing through him, the powerful man could not stay still. “I have but one solemn request of you, Samuel,” Cleopas said, drawing nearer and laying a massive hand on the shoulder of his visitor. “You must not mention at any time nor anywhere the name of *Cornelius* when you speak of the disciples. No one must know of his association or his connection with us. Do you take an oath?”

Sam sagged under the arm of the burly Judean, and realized the magnitude of the body that shielded an equally heroic spirit. While he felt no fear, the Jew’s intent was sure. *Do not mess with my people.*

“I promise to keep your secret.”

“Well done, then,” he replied, loosing Sam from his grasp. “What could be keeping our *friend?*”

## THE CENTURION

So now he, Cornelius, a pagan according to Jewish law, and his band of Legionnaires trudged down the dusty road from Jerusalem, with designs of staying the night at the same way-station and village of Emmaus that had been their first stop on their route from the coast. Only hours earlier he, along with Tribune Valerius, had take part in an event that had chilled his blood in a way that all the battles he'd ever fought had not.

*Valerius is a swaggering dog, not fit for the kennels of a canine. He is the reason Rome suffers ill repute. And a true coward; a first-rate bully. If I were not sworn to my oath as a Legionnaire, I'd...*

He suspended such treasonous thoughts as the image of the suffering man on the cross from earlier in the day came back to him. *The man Jesus was no coward*, he told himself.

Cornelius had been a man of the sword for so long that he found it hard to not consider ridding the world of a detestable creature such as Valerius by that means. After all, the mere taking of a life was easily accomplished.

*A Tribune! Valerius? Perhaps by rank, but not by honor*, he declared in self-talk. Alas, Cornelius had been a Centurion for over a dozen years now, and he would remain one, he supposed, until death. Tribunes were from the upper classes, the privileged ranks of the elite of Rome and her Provinces, and though he was a Senator's son as well, it was well known he was not blood line, but adopted.

The elites thought little of the men in the ranks who fought and bled for the Empire. It was the Centurion who, with his select hundred men, changed the course of battles, and forged the path to victory. But glory? That was reserved for the officer's corps, and Valerius reveled in his closeness to Procurator Pilate.

Such a contrast in character existed between the arrogant Tribune to the gentle Galilean who had been nailed on the cross that day. Valerius had shown an inordinate viciousness and cruelty toward the hapless criminals who had flanked him who was given the title, *King of the Jews*. And, Valerius delighted in his position over taking life, while Jesus demonstrated giving it.

Indeed, it was a spectacle that almost had brought Cornelius to, reach for the hilt of his sword. The pitiful, penetrating gaze of the tired, beaten, yet heroic Galilean had made him think better of dispatching Valerius to the underworld.

The Centurion paused to consider how he would deliver his message to the innkeeper of Emmaus now that he approached the side road leading to the boarding and dining hall.

Cornelius was no stranger to death. Nor had he been but a passive bystander in past executions. No... assuming the courts had justly passed their sentences, he'd done his duty without pause. Though some men had on occasion met their fate innocently by way of the cross or archer's field, those who were condemned by law were no better than any other man.

*Not so with this man Jesus. Cleopas the innkeeper would have wanted me to ransom him, he thought. I tried...but too late. But now... how do I tell him that not only is there no longer hope, but that I was forced to take part in the very execution of his Messiah?*

## PROMISES

Cleopas peered through the curtains. His staff of servers were occupied; his daughter, too. They all had been trained well. He was satisfied that, for now, the inn was in good hands. *But what of Cornelius*, he posed silently.

A knock at the back door. Then two more taps.

Cleopas smiled over at Sam and gave a nod. Sam remained seated at a small table in the dimly lit corner of this room, mainly used for storage.

“You must forgive me, friend Cleopas,” the sturdy Roman announced as he entered the back door. “There are things which happened yesterday that caused my delay. My men await us without. They will follow discreetly behind. I assume you have heard the news?”

“I have not been able to sleep for the commotion in my soul these past hours, ever since they took him away. What hear you, sir?”

“Are my words safe?” the Roman queried, motioning towards Sam.

“He is a Roman. I have been educating him on the sorry circumstances for some hours, awaiting your arrival. I apologize for not having made proper introductions. This is Samuel Antonius.”

“Greetings,” Sam offered, stepping out from the shadows. “I am Samuel, an observer in this land.”

“Sent by the courts of Rome, no doubt?” pressed the Centurion. “I must warn you now, Samuel Antonius, I am in no mood for intrigue.” He rested his grip firmly upon his broad sword and fixed Sam with a fierce gaze.

“I understand,” Sam nodded. “Look at my hands,” he found himself saying. “They are soft, unlike yours. A journal-keeper’s hands. There is no need...” he said to the Roman, his eyes flitting to the soldier’s sword.

“I may be of Rome, but I have seen treachery. You must forgive me, but I am in no mood for much inquiry. Not now, not today.”

“Come, my friend,” bade Cleopas, leading him to a corner dining table, leaving Sam at



the far end peering out a small window toward a setting sun. “Your soldiers? They are billeted outside the inn?”

“They are,” the sturdy Roman returned. “Half stay and half of the band accompany us up to Jerusalem. What do we have to do with this man?” he asked in an annoyed whisper, pointing to Sam.

Cleopas gave a slight hunch of the shoulders. “I am not sure. He has appeared out of nowhere. I do not know what to make of it. His Aramaic is impeccable, yet he asks to go to Jerusalem as if he has never seen this land. Truly educated, yet he seems naive and unsure of himself. I do not suspect him of foul intentions—not yet. He is either a very good actor on the stage of conspiracy or a complete newcomer to this land, as he claims. His clothes are remarkably well maintained for having journeyed up the road from the port of Caesarea. New robes, unlike I have ever seen. Very strange.”

“So, they are. I will inquire of him,” Cornelius replied, lowering his voice.

“No. Let us play along,” Cleopas urged. “Let us find all we can. If it be a ruse, a game he plays, he will surely give himself away. Then we may find his purposes and surely be warned whether this be part of Pilate’s scandal or that he has been sent from Tiberius Caesar himself.”

“Aye. That will be satisfactory. I will play the game with this man. But if he moves to bring one injustice to the brethren, I swear by the heavens, I shall...” He reached again for the hilt of his sword. Daggers equally formed in his eyes as he shot another glance at the visitor.

“Thou shalt not swear an oath, not at all!” Cleopas reprimanded sharply, then kindly added, “The Master required of us a higher thing.”

“Samuel Antonius. Your papers, please.” The Centurion abruptly stood and challenged the visitor.

Giving no thought, Sam involuntarily reached into his tunic and retrieved them. “Certainly. Here you are,” he said, himself surprised at their sudden appearance.

The Roman, tilting the papers toward the candlelight, gave them a cursory inspection. “Hum. Well, then. You are from the Senate—a librarian, it appears. And may I ask your duty here in Palestine?”

“To heal a broken heart,” he mumbled. “And to wake up,” he added under his breath.

“What? Again man, speak!”

“To inquire. To learn. To report... That is all.”

“A spy,” Cornelius scoffed.

“I am a reporter—one who sees, hears, and records for history. I have many questions as to why I have been sent here, believe me. I am eager both to learn and to return home.” Sam stopped in his tracks. He was surprised at how fluid the words came to his lips, as if rehearsed somewhere before.

“You have family in Rome?”

“I have family, yes, but not in Rome.”

“Wife? Children?”

“Yes. Wife and children.”

“This is a dangerous land, Samuel Antonius. One so soft as you...” the Centurion mocked, and yet spoke truly, “...traveling alone, one such as you could find himself in grave danger.”

“I agree, Centurion. I would ask your intervention. May I travel with you to Jerusalem?” inquired Sam.

“We are going this hour. It is but sixty furlongs. As you can see the very lights of the city and temple, even Fortress Antonia and the Governor’s Palace come to view with the setting of the sun. Where are you staying this night?”

Sam found himself calculating furlongs to miles. *Six miles*, he thought. *Central Park to Battery Park in Manhattan*, he added. He was at an impasse. His mind was here, his body was in recovery now, or...perhaps even dead! He shuddered at the thought. If he could just make all this go away! He turned away from the two men and thought of home; and *Joy*. He squeezed his eyes shut. *Wake up now*, he commanded himself.

“I asked you sir: Where do you intend to stay?” the Centurion insisted. He drew closer to Sam, a look of menace in his eyes.

Sam reached out to touch him. *This isn’t really happening, is it?*

The barrel-chested soldier countered this perceived threat by sidestepping, seizing Sam’s hand and giving it a quick, downward thrust.

Sam recoiled in fright. “Ouch! Hey... you’re hurting me! God in heaven!”

“What say you?” the Roman asked pointedly. “What God speak you of?”

“Just a manner of speech. That hurt!” howled Sam, shaking his hand, then stopping to examine the red mark that was beginning to appear. He believed that dreams held messages, and had a certain amount of meaning and purpose. But this was becoming all too painful; painful *and* real.

“Your destination!” Cornelius demanded.

“I am going to Jerusalem. I have been sent to this inn. I have been told one named Cleopas will guide me to where I must make my inquiries. I do not know where I will stay when I reach the city. I seek your advice on the matter,” he grumbled, still rubbing his aching knuckles.

“You are playing with me, Samuel Antonius. You may stay at Fortress Antonia. Any Roman citizen sent from the Senate knows very well he is a guest in the Governor’s Palace during this festival of Passover, or any other.”

“I am on an unwanted assignment, an unwilling player,” Sam returned sharply. He gasped at the next thought that flooded his brain: *I may never wake up, never see Joy again. What if...this is it! Hell, what I deserve for a life of cynicism, a life without faith...*

“Very well, then,” Cleopas interjected. “Come join us now. We depart for Jerusalem at once. There you will be led by Centurion Cornelius to Pilate’s residence, where you may present your papers.

The centurion added: “I must ask you to promise that there will be no mention of my name as to my association to or with the followers of Jesus. Jerusalem is a dangerous place tonight. One could easily be found dead,” he hinted, “given the jealousies and suspicions which have invaded the city these past few days.”

“You have my word,” Sam meekly replied.

“We go,” Cleopas said as he gathered the bag he had prepared for his stay in the Holy City. “This is no ordinary night. The Passover closes with the setting sun. We must hurry. Come!”

## FRIENDS

Sam's journey to another time and place had seemed more surreal, as each moment passed. He had heard before of out-of-body experiences. Perhaps this was one. Sam had interviewed mediums and those who professed to have passed on and then returned from beyond mortality. But he had seen no bright lights, no kind judge, no face of God showering love upon him, as was the general story. The Roman soldier had hurt him.

His sedation was real—he was sure of that. Joy had touched him. He was sure of that, too. These drug-induced images were players come to torment him now. *If I'm asleep, at least it is proving entertaining as well as enlightening*, he thought as he pondered on his situation. He watched the reunion, still massaging the back of his hand.

“Oh, Friend!” squealed Sariah, daughter of the innkeeper, upon seeing the big Roman. She had entered through the curtain separating the dining hall from this back room, and immediately flew to him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist.

“Child,” he spoke tenderly as he knelt down near her beaming face. “Such beautiful eyes. I have something for you.”

*I know that voice*, Sam noticed, as the Centurion's declarations softened in tone.

“You mustn't,” begged Cleopas, adding, “You are spoiling the girl.”

“Let her be spoiled,” the Centurion laughed. “It is enough that life is dreary and hard in these times.” That said, he dug into a pouch he carried over one shoulder. “For a Princess,” he displayed happily, forgetting momentarily the seriousness of life as it was.

“Oh Father! See? A real looking glass! I can see my face! Like holding a pool of waters in my hands,” she excitedly exclaimed.

Sam looked on from the dimness of the corner to which he had retreated. *Such humility here*, he thought.

Cornelius's smile widened. “Look, she beams like an angel, dear friend Cleopas. This truly has been worth my trip. The ivory handle is from the coasts of Africa. And the glass from my homeland of Iberia,” he boasted, stroking the edge of the mirror.

“I believe she sees an angel in Roman uniform,” Cleopas replied. “As do I.”

Sam studied the stance of the man, his stature, his athletic build. *In appearance, voice, and mannerisms...* he thought.

“Child, is all ready? I know you wish to be merry, but we must be departing shortly,” Cleopas said, returning to the more serious matters at hand.

“Father,” Sariah chirped, “I have arranged the food stores and have the house in order. What more shall I do?”

Cleopas raised his head, whispered something unheard, and embraced his daughter. “Thank you, child, for your willing obedience. Please go to your cousin at the far end of the village and abide there while I go to Jerusalem. Our hired help shall manage things here. I will return on the morrow.”

“You go to see mother? To see John Mark, too?” she asked, her hopeful eyes glinting with moisture.

He smiled down at his auburn-haired child, kissing her on each soft alabaster-toned cheek. “Yes. To mother and to your betrothed. I shall send him your loving greetings. Go, now. God be with you, my little lamb.”

Sariah dabbed at her eyes with her apron. “And with you, father. I shall pray for you, mother, and the others,” she offered as she departed. “Shalom, sir,” she added, turning in the direction of Sam.

“Yes. Shalom, Sariah,” Sam respectfully returned.

She lunged toward the Roman Centurion and wrapped her arms once more around a broad waist burdened with sword and sheath. The looking glass in her hand, she pressed her cheek against his massive upper body.

“God be with you, Sariah,” he whispered.

“And with you, *Friend*.”

## HE IS DEAD

Road to Jerusalem

Now that they were on the road, Cornelius tendered the bad news that Cleopas had been too terrified to inquire about. Cleopas had even asked the Centurion to delay the news of his Lord's fate—until they were on their way.

He feared that he might not have the emotional strength to leave the inn for Jerusalem if his worst fears became confirmed. "Better to be on the journey," he had whispered to the Centurion at the inn.

Though now he knew the truth, still he was not taking it easily. He had to stop once to gather himself. Try as he might, he could not accept the fact that he never would be able to redeem himself; that he would never again see his beloved spiritual leader. Cornelius, after delivering the tearful words, had to steady him, and at length, they had resumed the journey.

"I was appointed to carry out the execution," Cornelius finally added. "I initially refused. Then I thought I might find occasion to free him at the last minute, there atop the hill they call Calvary, the place of execution. But...I failed. I lacked the ultimate strength of will to stand against the Empire. Now I wish I had ordered my men against the garrison of the Fortress Antonia. I should have had the courage to set Jesus of Nazareth free. Yet..."

Sam listened intently. The many gaps in the biblical New Testament tale were being filled in before his eyes, even if he was merely concocting this scene in his sleeping subconscious.

"You are no coward, Centurion. I am, but you are not," Cleopas insisted. He hesitated, stopping in the middle of the road. Reaching for his mid-section, he doubled over in agony and fell to the dusty road. "I cannot go on!"

Cleopas wept, unashamed. The Centurion glanced back to his men, some hundred meters to the rear. They would not have seen this demonstration yet. "Come, Cleopas," he gently urged, hoisting the innkeeper to his feet. "Samuel, assist me, if you please."

Sam hurried forward and took an arm on the opposite side of the soldier. The Centurion again glanced back at his men. “I am fortunate to have such trusted soldiers assigned to my charge,” he offered. “I fear, however, that I am out of grace with Pilate,” grunted Cornelius as they trudged up the hilly dirt lane headed for Jerusalem’s southern gate.

Sam observed and listened as Cornelius explained to Cleopas how his hundred men had been split in two groups to accommodate increased trade along this route.

“With Quintus, my right hand and Sergeant, commanding the fifty in Jerusalem, they were required to do the dirty work of the Governor.” A part of my band are still now stationed in Jerusalem, with the other positioned in the port of Caesarea on the coast,” Cornelius finished.

Sam watched as these soldiers from the coast hung back to protect the small caravan they accompanied from Emmaus. These had not yet been in Jerusalem this week. Respectful, they were within easy distance to protect their Centurion and his fellows, the innkeeper and himself, and Samuel the supposed librarian.

“Does he know?” Cleopas questioned, his tone anxious and hurried. He referred to Pilate, the Governor, and his knowledge of the crucifixion of Christ.

Sam fought to keep up. He wasn’t used to traipsing further than the elevator to his studios in the CNTV building on Fifth Avenue. His breathing labored; his muscles ached. The riveting discourse between Cornelius and Cleopas, however, kept him from dwelling on his personal troubles.

“I wasn’t able to deliver the ransom note, friend Cleopas,” confessed the Centurion. “I was late. But if Pilate does know my allegiance to you and the other disciples, I will lay out a case he shall never forget. I will go against the Empire, if I have to. For that matter, I will go to my father’s home and to the Senate, filing a motion to censure Pilate for this murder.”

Cleopas wagged his head. “You are of more service to us now than ever. What will become of our small Jewish church?”

“Jewish church no longer. It is now mine as well; it is for all peoples. Do not you recall that He commanded your disciples, even Peter, to one day go into all the world?”

“Yes, but there are Jews in all the world,” Cleopas kindly rejoined.

“This faith, this belief in goodness, in love, in brotherly service—these healings of the body, spirit, and soul are not to be for Jews alone, my dear friend,” countered the soldier.

As Sam huffed to keep up, he was stunned at the larger vision of the one and the lack of insight of the other. *If they only knew how big this movement would grow*, he thought to himself.

“If they, the rulers, find Peter, John, James, and the others; will they run?” Cornelius asked candidly.

“No! Never! Not again! Nor will I run! I will offer to be crucified, if I must!” Cleopas swore. “Never will I run again!” He swung his fist as a witness of his determination.

Cornelius was sure of what he would do. Still, he needed to know that he, alone, would not be making a stand; that others would be at his side when the time came. This small assurance brightened him. “Though Jesus be dead, he is buried in the tomb of merchant Joseph of Aramathea, in the garden near where the execution took place. At least we may honor him at our pleasure.” Cornelius supposed the fact might lighten Cleopas’s heavy mood.

Cleopas lurched to a stop once more. “I know the place. It is true. Oh...” The story of Jesus’ death, though described in detail for the last hour by the Centurion, only seemed to sink in deeper with each step he took.

Suddenly, Cleopas felt weak and highly vulnerable. Perhaps it was that he was completely spent from lack of sleep. Or that he had not eaten for two and one-half days. Faint, the realization of his Master’s demise setting in even more firmly, he stumbled, fell completely to the dusty road as before, and this time let out a frail yet audible sob—the kind of anguished cry a brother might emit at the loss of one he loved so thoroughly.

The sob turned into two, then three. At last Cleopas managed to gasp through his tears, “I can’t. I—I can’t go there. Let me die here. Tell my Mary. I feel so completely lost and tired.”

Sam watched silently; journalistic curiosity overtaking him.

“Cleopas! Brother!” the Centurion intoned gently as he shielded his sturdy Jewish friend from the cruel setting sun with his even larger frame.

Then Cornelius did something unthinkable, especially in possible sight of his men: he knelt, reached down, and lifted the other to his feet, then embraced him, sharing in his friend’s private agony. “Come, now,” he urged at last. “Time is spent. Jerusalem lies just ahead. We must make haste. You have me to carry you, if I must. You are needed.”

“For what?” the overwrought innkeeper whimpered. “He is dead. You yourself witnessed it?” he asked, as if still in a state of dazed unbelief. “How can this be? I had the money to free



him! Why?"

The Centurion stood looking skyward, blinking at the moisture burning his own eyes now. "Yes, I saw. I gently helped take the spikes out," his commanding voice broke. "He is dead, but always with us here." The Centurion rapped the center of his chest.

The caravan and Cornelius's band of soldiers were yet on the opposite side of the hill, had not crested it as these three had. Thus, they had not beheld what had taken place. Even in all his bluster, Cornelius was glad of that. For now, the trust and confidence of his men was vital.

Cleopas at last regained his composure. "I am so weak—oh, may God hear my prayer! Please..." he gritted through the tears.

Sam stood stock still, taking it all in. And for the first time this night of post-surgical repose, he swallowed a bit of salty moisture. He tried keeping his emotions at bay; to maintain the reporter composure he had earned over many years at many celebrated sites of brotherhood in war and peace. But his efforts were in vain. He had been eyewitness to this scene dozens of times—similar manly emotion on the battlefields as a young journalist in hot spots around the globe, and more recently in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Whatever this was—a dream, a visit to the wall of time that melded past history with history's hazy, mystical future, or another dimension he had broken into—Sam was moved at the depth of feeling here.

"Come, Cleopas. We must go. We could be seen in this awkwardness. I am your brother, indeed, but we must be strong, show strength," implored the Centurion. "Let us deliver Samuel Antonius to Pilate's mansion and be done with him. We shall then repair to seek out the others. Then, I am afraid, I must report to Tribune Valerius."

They plodded onward once more, Sam holding back a few respectful paces but leaning forward to overhear all he could about these two, their doubts, fears, and faith alike.

He overheard the Centurion recount what he had learned of the follower Judas, who had betrayed the Master. "Hung himself. In a potter's field. Hurling the silver coins before the priests in the Temple. The thirty pieces that the Sanhedrin had paid him for the betrayal. Poor fellow," he added.

"I too pity him," said Cleopas, now more sedate, seemingly having cleansed himself of an overwhelming agony. "I too betrayed him once," he moaned, "and like Judas, for money..."

Cornelius interrupted with a grunt. "Do not rehearse that again! Surely, Jesus forgave

you. You said he looked into your eyes and smiled. You said that at that precise moment a wave of peace swept over you. What sign more do you seek than from God?"

"Yes. I must remember that." Cleopas mopped at his face as they hurried up the hill to the city. "Still, I have prayed for ten thousand days since that first lost opportunity in Bethlehem to have Him stay, even if for a moment, as a guest at my inn. I had hoped that he might grace the open door of my humble boarding home. You know, give him the room I had once denied him as a babe. Now...it is forever too late."

"It is said in ancient Hebrew text," Sam broke in at last, as they neared the gate of Gennath, "that the dead shall rise from the grave." Hearing this, the other two stopped, frozen in their tracks, and eyed him questioningly.

Cleopas let out a short gasp and stared over at his mysterious new friend, his mouth agape, then asked, "You know Hebrew? You have read the scrolls of Ezekiel? Jeremiah? Isaiah? Job?"

"Yes, I have read a compendium of the scrolls," Sam answered. "Before I arrived in Judea."

"He, Jesus," Cornelius nodded, "prophesied that 'this temple shall be destroyed but raise the third day.' Some say it is his body he referred to. Others, the temple itself."

"No one understands that to mean anything but His spirit, surely," Cleopas returned, "just as all men's spirits go on."

Sam met the innkeeper's gaze. "He could have meant it literally, referring to the temple of his body. But as a student and reporter of the human condition, I must add that He might have been speaking in figurative terms as well."

Sam let his words sink in. He knew what his beloved Joy believed. Clearly, these men believed in the divinity of Jesus. But, of course, they had seen him, witnessed certain things. But he Sam, refused to believe. Without seeing miracles for himself, or at least unearthing evidence of miracles, healings, and such linked to the man Jesus, it was all story-telling and supposition.

Now, in the dimension, as the Twilight Zone TV series would say, "...caught between sight and sound," he was somehow wrapped up in this historic—albeit dreamlike—frame of mind. Sam felt compelled to offer to his two fellow travelers, that the New Testament commentary of literal resurrection found in the Four Gospels was a possibility.

The two men continued to glance over at him, lost in thought. Yet their countenances spoke volumes: they were acknowledging the plausibility of Jesus' literal resurrection.

"You speak as one having faith," Cleopas replied as they came within sight of Jerusalem. "You do not cease to amaze me, Samuel Antonius."

Sam merely shook off the idea. "Not faith, just interest in truth."

The Centurion drew a finger to his lips. "Let us be cautious now. There are many ears in this city, those all too anxious to play the informer for a mere shekel. False steps may give the enemies of those who followed the Master a doom too horrible to contemplate. Come. Let us enter the gate quietly."

## “IT IS FINISHED”

“This is where we part, for now, friend,” the Centurion said, gripping the other’s hand and forearm with his. “I must escort Samuel to the residence of the Procurator. I shall seek word of you at John Mark’s soon. Go there.”

“I shall. Then on the morrow you will return with me to Emmaus?” Cleopas asked, having found renewed sense of purpose and strength.

“Yes. I shall meet you at this gate at the sixth hour.”

“Very well. Shalom, my friend,” Cleopas saluted. “And peace be unto you, Samuel. I hope you find what you seek. You are welcome to return to my inn with us on the morrow.”

“Shalom, Cleopas. I appreciate your hospitality. Will you be safe?” Sam’s head tilted toward the figure of a man nearby.

“Being here, now, yes. The man in the shadows? That is one of the brethren, waiting to escort me,” he said under his breath, gesturing toward a wall and alleyway ten meters to his left. The man nodded and motioned for Cleopas to join him. “I shall be safe, Samuel, and thank you for the concern. Forgive my pitiful and unmanly display of emotions. I have no excuse. I will gather strength once I reach John Mark’s and find my wife Mary.”

“No need to apologize. I understand,” Sam replied.

“Remember your promise to me?” Cleopas asked, hinting of the Centurion’s veiled friendship with the disciples. “And if we do not meet again, when you make your report, you will tell the world I did not refuse my Master the second time? Tell them that Cleopas, the innkeeper of Bethlehem and Emmaus, gave everything he had to the cause. And though failing, his intent and heart was full and right for Jesus of Nazareth. You will tell the world?”

Sam gave a nod. “Yes, I promise.”

“God bless you, then,” he offered, reaching out to grip Sam’s forearms. “I will keep my promise to you as well,” he weakly smiled. “Farewell, my brothers,” he whispered as he slipped into the darkened side streets of Jerusalem in company of the stranger.

“Come, Samuel,” the ruddy-complexioned soldier ordered. Glancing back over his shoulder, Sam followed Cornelius.

They had walked but a few paces when Sam opened up. “You are a true friend. Uncommon. Very uncommon.”

The Roman issued no response.

The Passover having ended, the Sabbath-day observances complete, the Jewish pilgrims were preparing for their departure to the many towns of Palestine, Judea, and Galilee. The Jerusalem residents, in turn, solemnly hushed with the going down of the sun, had settled their business this day. Heavy thoughts on the events that shook the city in the past three days occupied the vivid story-telling taking place behind closed doors and shuttered windows as the two made their way through deserted streets.

Cornelius at last broke the stillness. “The city trembled yesterday. Sabbath eve. The ground quaked. A storm unlike any I have ever beheld overtook the very sun in the heavens. Blackened the sky. The day turned completely dark, as it now begins to be. But the hour was not yet evening.”

“Such things happen,” Sam responded.

“Yes, but this was no simple anomaly of weather. This happened precisely with the speaking of three words. I heard them; I was there.”

“Where?”

“The hill of the skull. Golgotha, Jerusalemites call it.”

“What were the words?” Sam queried, suddenly aware that a new, more intimate openness was emerging between him and the Roman soldier.

“It is finished,” he replied solemnly.

“The words came from whom?”

“The Jew called Jesus.”

“Did you participate in the crucifixion?”

“Fair question,” the soldier groaned, his chin lowering to meet his chest. “Yes, and no. I refused Pilate’s order to carry out the execution. I saw through it. My sympathies have been suspected for some time. Normally, I would have begged off under the pretense of illness. Instead, I commanded my subordinate, Quintus, to commence, then I had a plaque delivered. It was posted above the head of the martyred Master. Then, not being able to stay away, drawn somehow to the site, I was there when he gave up the ghost. By refusing to go directly and immediately to the execution site, I confirmed the suspicions of Pilate’s main henchman Valerius, a Tribune of noble birth; one willing to do whatever it takes to rise in position and authority. His father knows my father. Though both senators, they are hardly friends.”

“He a Tribune and you a Centurion?”

“Yes. I am adopted. All know it. I am Iberian of birth.”

“That must make you feel—”

Cornelius cut him off mid-sentence. “Nothing! May they all be damned! I feel nothing! Do I need their honors? It is nothing but hollowness. Empty sounds reverberate from their chests as they pound upon them in their pride,” he spit out disdainfully. “I know who I am. That is enough.”

Sam was in his zone now. The interviewer asking tough questions, seeking raw emotions in order to expose the naked truth. “What did the wood plaque say?” he queried.

The soldier grunted something in Latin, then smiled. “Nice to win, now and then. A victory, of sorts. Valerius himself posted it above the Master, thinking to trap me. Ha!”

Sam nodded. He was fully aware of the words it contained. He’d seen the movie; the Hollywood version. “Pilate didn’t mind?”

“No. It has been whispered that his soul is tormented. His wife Claudia came to him troubled by a dream, telling him to not ‘lay a hand on this man.’ Now he wished he hadn’t, I can tell you. He wanted nothing to do with the scheming Sanhedrin, led by Caiaphas, the High Priest. Washed his hands of the whole matter. Made them assent to the death of the innocent man, by releasing a true criminal. One named Barrabas. At least I give him that.”

“And Valerius?”

“Valerius is a proud man and a fool. He reminds me in both visage and manner of a dangerous animal, a weasel or badger; something with sharp eyes and equally sharp teeth. Watch yourself with that one,” Cornelius added for emphasis. “One false step, one move against Emperor Tiberius in word or deed, and he shall pave his path to the top upon your sun-bleached bones.”

Sam considered the passion of the Roman and fell silent as the two wound their way down alleyways and streets. “The old city,” he whispered.

“Not a word now,” cautioned the Centurion, “not until we arrive at the Fortress.”

*If I am alive, I should be waking from the surgery soon,* Sam thought. Now he wondered about life going on for him at all. Perhaps he was permanently banished to the world of Christian classics as punishment for his agnosticism. Perhaps, unlike the Christ of this story, “It is finished” would never come to pass.

## THE TRIBUNE

“Announce us to Pilate’s offices. Make haste, soldier.” The order brought the guard to full readiness. “I have with me this man, librarian from the Senate, who brings a message from Rome.”

With that, Cornelius turned and issued instructions for his men to report to their quarters. The guard saluted Centurion Cornelius and left him, along with Sam, at the entrance to the Procurator’s palace, in company of another guard.

“I hope you have prepared your message from the Senate, Samuel Antonius.”

Sam blinked and swallowed hard. He glanced around at the cold but stately surroundings. He sensed danger, and even death here. Legionnaires lined the outer perimeter. The gate was guarded closely. The crude laughter, a scream he thought he heard coming from inside, told him the place had also known much pain.

“These soldiers are tested. Make no mistake, Samuel,” Cornelius whispered. “With the cold blood of steel and iron running through their veins, these are men of battle, bearing bloodied weapons of war—spears, broad swords, shields—always expecting trouble, inflicting swift punishment to those who oppose them. Not to be trifled with,” he added for emphasis. “They protect the emperor’s governor, and even I, a recognized Centurion, must pass the test—the utter and complete scrutiny of these guards—if I am to enter these gates,” Cornelius finished.

*He was scourged here*, Sam thought. He’d witnessed the passion play of the Christ’s final moments, the mocking of the Roman soldiers, but not once had he seen the respect this Centurion paid. He also recalled the innkeeper’s biblical cry to Joseph and Mary: “*No room!*” But until now he had never heard the innkeeper’s lament.

Sam gazed at his Roman escort. Everything seemed so familiar. When his voice shifted from commanding and demanding, to quietly instructive, there was a quality he seemed to recognize, a milder characteristic to it. He admired the steadiness of the man and his utter contempt for worldly authority as he calmly dealt it out himself. The centurion held close to him, like a hand of cards well played, his private disdain for pompous political players, while his simultaneous surrender to that same authority, was used to meet his ends.

Some time passed before the guard returned. In his wake strode another man, a crimson tunic draped authoritatively over one shoulder. He strutted as he walked, wearing brass breast-plates and symbols announcing, silently yet commandingly, that he was a high-ranking officer.

“Valerius himself,” Cornelius whispered. “Guard your words.”

“Centurion Cornelius. I would have thought you in Caesarea by now. But then you had a weak stomach yesterday.”

Sam observed how Valerius sized him up the way a hungry man might a T-bone steak. The insolent eye contact, the bold swagger, the verbal sparring, all in an attempt to raise from Cornelius some cross word. “And who have we here?” The query was not so much a question as a challenge.

“He presented his papers with your guard. You know who he is by now.” Cornelius spared no words. Sam sensed that it was the only way to deal with such a man: direct, bold, yet plain.

“Yes. A librarian of the Senate. A soft man. One not accustomed to the harsh conditions of Palestine. Well, the Procurator has retired. I shall see you both to the guest chambers.” Then, to add a bit of salt to the wound he was in the process of inflicting, he added, speaking to Cornelius, “I assume that you have no problem staying in the same hall with a citizen, a civilian of Rome?”

“I understand it to be an honor.”

“And a duty, Centurion,” Valerius spat back. “We waste no manpower here on suspected spies. You brought him, you guard him. There has been enough intrigue this past week to last a year.”

He turned to the guard nearest him. “Escort them to the guest chambers,” he commanded. “Lodging suitable for honored visitors of Rome.”

The guard nodded for them to follow after him. “Samuel Antonius,” Valerius called after them, his voice smooth as silk, “I hope you will excuse what may appear as rudeness. It is simply a matter of many duties to attend to.”

“No need, Tribune Valerius,” Sam replied.

“By your leave, then. Gentlemen, we shall expect you to break the fast with the Governor in the morning at the first hour. The day starts early. Good evening to you.”

“And to you, Tribune,” Sam indulged.

“By your leave, Tribune Valerius,” Cornelius saluted.

Valerius nodded, turned, and then stopped once more. “Oh, by the way, Centurion,” he called out. “Pilate was amused. Thought it would be something you’d like to have; a memento, shall we say?” He tossed an oblong, wooden object to the ground before Cornelius, its clatter echoing down the hall. “Hail the Divine Tiberius,” the Tribune offered with the stiff hand salute.

The Centurion did not flinch, conspicuously refusing to offer the customary return of salute.

“I see,” Valerius noted. “Well, then. You may have your God and King, Centurion. Yours



is all a matter of time.” He made sure to catch the eye of Centurion Cornelius, see the contempt in them, judging his adversary well.

“He does not like you,” Sam whispered as the Tribune turned his back and walked away.

“Nor you. You did not return the salute, either,” Cornelius noted, and reached down to retrieve the coarse plaque. He brushed at it as if wiping dust, dirt, or filth of any kind from it. Satisfied that it no longer bore a scintilla of Valerius’s stench and stain, he held it up reverently before tucking it safely inside his leather satchel, hung from his waistband. “We must be still tonight. The guards will spy on us,” he added.

Sam nodded, all too willing to sleep and be done with this drama; willing to awaken to Joy’s beautiful smile. He looked on as Cornelius finished concealing the inscribed wooden sign among the many documents, orders and other correspondence that filled the satchel. He had recognized three languages etched into the board. He did not understand the Hebrew and Greek, but he could plainly make out the third, the Latin: *Jesus of Nazareth— King of the Jews*.

## FORTRESS ANTONIA

The summons to attend the morning meal came early. Antonia Palace, situated within the walls of the Fortress Antonia, consisted of a series of corridors flanked by the traditional Grecian columns. It rose a mere one hundred meters from the sleeping quarters of the soldiers. Statues of a variety of appropriated Gods from the Greek and other cultures—and more than one bust of the various Caesars—lined the long halls interconnecting rooms designed for meetings, banquets, tribunals, and entertainment.

Sam was awestruck with the majesty of Rome, manifest in the architectural and artistic perfection of integrated marble floors, columns, porticos, balustrades, and the fine plaster moldings that seamlessly blended to make this place a classic archetype of the Roman Empire. In fact, the edifice, it seemed, held a splendor and majesty separate from all other structures in the city.

*All the movies I've seen wrapped into one...* Sam thought. *The Greatest Story Ever Told, Cleopatra, Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ, The Robe...* Sam expected to see Charleton Heston enter any moment to greet Tribune Massala from the classic, *Ben Hur*.

"Remember Samuel, the simplest answers," warned Cornelius in lowered voice as he straightened his tunic. "You did well with Valerius last night. Now, let us see if you can skillfully maneuver the Procurator. But again, remember, you will find better reporting for your Senate with less talk and more listening."

"I've dealt with many politicians in my days of reporting. Indeed, you are quite right."

"Here we are," Cornelius quietly announced.

Valerius appeared at a set of double-entry doors opening to an elaborately appointed dining hall. Awaiting within were a rectangular table with mirror-polished marble slab, silver dining ware, and seats arranged for six. Valerius motioned for them to enter. "A sound sleep, gentlemen of Rome?" he inquired, nodding toward Sam.

"Yes, Tribune. Quite sound," Sam lied.

"Well, then, I assume our brave Centurion is rested enough today to see to the Procurator's requests." He raised an eyebrow toward Cornelius.

"I and my men are always at the command of the Procurator," Cornelius curtly announced.

"Seems you hesitated to take charge of the crucifixion," blurted Valerius, cocking his head to one side and adding, "upon the Procurator's order, at that. I believe he may have a word or two

for you in that respect.” Pilate and his wife had not yet arrived. The Tribune was probing his adversary, but stabbing at Cornelius as well, seeking to throw him off balance; cause the man to stumble or lose control of his emotions.

“I was there,” Cornelius unflinchingly announced.

“Ah, yes. After the awful business had already commenced. You do admire this dead man, Jesus of Nazareth, don’t you, Centurion?”

Cornelius’s mind raced to summon what he might say. Simultaneously, it harkened back to that fateful hour just two days earlier. In seconds he recalled it all: the order, his anger, his reaction...

## THE CENTURION'S CHOICE

Jerusalem, Two Days Ago

“You are to personally carry out the execution of this Jewish troublemaker, Centurion Cornelius. Here are your orders, direct from the Procurator, I might add.” Valerius sneered, aware of the man’s admiration for the Jews and, in particular, this condemned Jesus of Nazareth.

Cornelius tucked the order away, saluted, and turned to leave.

“Yes, see to it, Centurion,” the Tribune called after him. “I will be watching and reporting to Pilate. See that you do not disappoint me.”

With Valerius’s departure, Cornelius sought out his second in command and handed him the written charge. “See to it, Quintus,” he instructed softly. “And hasten this man’s death that he might not suffer.”

Then, before Quintus could take his leave, the commander once more addressed his duties. “Quintus,” he added. The soldier came to attention.

“Take your time in route to the place of execution. I have a matter to conduct. I am quite ill and have suffered greatly this past week. You have been a witness to my condition?” he asked, with his eyes as much as with his voice.

“Aye, Centurion. I have been a witness.”

“Good. Now go. I will refrain from being at hand during the nailing. See to it. I will come as quickly as I gain command over my sickness.”

Quintus saluted and exited to call his men to their task. Now feigning ill, Cornelius, though he trod a bit slower, went directly to the carpenter’s repair room, which occupied a remote corner of the fortress compound. A slab of fresh-cut cedar caught his attention the minute he entered. It rested upon a bench as if destined for this purpose.

“Carpenter!” he called out. A local craftsman who worked for the Roman garrison appeared.

“Prepare me a sign. Upon the orders of Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Rome.”

“Yes, master. What shall I inscribe?”

“Inscribe the following...” Taking an iron marker, he then lightly scratched the caption into the hard-baked clay ground outside the carpenter’s door, words in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.

“All three languages?”

“Yes.”

It took but a few minutes for the craftsman to finish the job, whereupon Cornelius commanded, “Wax!”

The man dripped a portion of sealing wax on the back of the plaque, onto which, using his ring, the Centurion stamped the Roman emblem of the Cornelius family, an official seal his men would recognize. Then, with an ink quill and crimson tincture, he offered a brief message next to his wax seal and charged the worker to deliver the etched board to Quintus.

The command on the back was clear: *Post above the man, by order*, it read.

“Do not delay, carpenter. And, for your trouble,” he finished, tossing the laborer a silver coin. “Hurry! Go! Another carpenter awaits,” he glumly added under his breath.

The man hurried off down the street. Cornelius lagged behind, tormented by a mixture of guilt, abhorrence, fear, and torn allegiance. Finally, he began his long—and deliberately slow—journey through the narrow streets, on his way to Golgotha.

## PILATE SPEAKS

Pilate's Quarters – Present Day

“Centurion! Did I make myself clear? You do admire this dead man of Nazareth, don’t you?” Valerius scoffed.

“As the words on the plaque were inscribed,” Cornelius answered, awakening his mind from his reverie to the present danger.

“Well, here comes our Governor now,” Valerius noted, eyeing the far wing of the dining hall. “Hail, Caesar Tiberius, the only King, and his Governor of Palestine, the most excellent Pontius Pilate!” the Tribune announced.

“Yes, yes. Hail to all,” Pilate responded, clearly in no mood for formalities. A chill ran up Sam’s back upon first sight of the man. Indeed, a solemn dark cloud seemed to follow him. He appeared nervous and agitated. His eyes flitted from face to face, only pausing long enough to lock a stern scowl on each pair of eyes. He took his place at the head of the table and motioned for the others to be seated.

“Who have we today?” he asked coolly, his gaze fixed upon the still-empty bowl set before him.

“The Centurion Cornelius has escorted one Samuel Antonius from the Senate Library to your Palace, your Excellency.”

“And what business does citizen Antonius bring from Rome?”

“He brings no apparent business, sir, but is an *observer*,” reported Valerius, the dead weight of the latter word catching in his throat as if a shred of rotting meat.

The victuals arrived. Pilate paid them no mind, but continued his duel of words. “Ah, an observer. Well, then, I hope he *observed* scrupulously the events of the past two days.” With that, he squinted, then set to rotating his head, his neck acting as a fulcrum. “Couldn’t sleep,” he mewed to no one in particular. “Haven’t had an appetite. I must have the illness contracted by our intrepid Centurion.”

Tribune Valerius glared over at Cornelius, a smirk written upon his face, clearly pleased that Pilate had already presented the issue of Cornelius’s failure the hour of the Nazarene’s execution.

“Well, then, Samuel Antonius. Alone? No assistant?” Pilate asked, motioning to the servers to take away food with which he, at the moment, happened to be annoyed.

“I come alone, Governor Pilate. I bring greetings.”

“Yes, I am sure you do,” he muttered, his words like ice. Then, without so much as shifting in his seat, he addressed Cornelius. “And how did you happen upon this man, Centurion?”

“On the road.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Strange.”

“Yes, sire.”

Again, Pilate’s questioning eyes turned to Sam, though his full attention seemed focused on the platter of assorted fruit set before him. “How is it that you are found traveling, alone, on the road to Jerusalem from Caesarea, Samuel Antonius?” Then, as if he had suddenly remembered his manners, he exclaimed, motioning to the others, “Eat, eat!”

“I did not come alone, not entirely,” Sam began, not sure where his comment was leading, “But I am pleased to say...” he stammered.

Just then Pilate’s wife entered. Sam sighed in relief as the ashen, obviously shaken woman hurried to his side and spoke openly for all to hear. “Did I not *tell* you! Did I not *warn* you!” she shrieked. “It has come to pass. Now all is lost. You will hear from Tiberius himself. What shall we do?”

Pilate became instantly agitated by the commotion. “Get control, woman! Of what news do you speak?” he roared, rising from the table to meet her eye to eye.

“The High Priest. He waits. Oh, if you had seen my dream. Our fate is sealed! Now we will suffer for condemning the just Galilean!” she lamented in a state of high anxiety.

Pilate’s patience was wearing thin. He rose from the table and began to pace. His mind had been plagued by the affair ever since its climax two days earlier. Now his own culpability in the matter had reached its zenith. “*Ecce homo!* I said to the crowd. *Ecce homo!* *Behold the man!* The man in whom I find no guilt! I told them! I...I did not... CONDEMN HIM! I WASHED MY HANDS!” he shouted, now pacing all the more, his eyes scanning the courtyard below.

“The rabble! The damnable mob! They demanded it for their God! The High Priest brought him condemned already...for treason, they said. For blaspheme, they claimed! Claudia, by all the Gods of Rome, I swear, I did not condemn Jesus of Nazareth!” The Governor was trembling now, nervous glances darting about the room.

For his part, Valerius was taking in this scene, this marvelous turn of events, with cautious delight. He saw through the Governor's thin-skinned bravado. Pilate's weakness would buckle under Valerius's lust for power. For years Valerius had coveted the governorship. Now his meticulous scheming would pay off. He felt sure his time was soon at hand.

"Well? Where is Caiaphas?" he barked. "Cannot a man get a portion of food to start his day before these people bring their problems to me? Tribune!"

"Yes sire. I will see to it." Valerius stood, bowed, and discreetly exited the room.

"You see, Samuel Antonius, what I have to deal with? You may tell the Senate. Tell them that the Governor barely rises in the morning and cannot take a morsel of food for nourishment. Rather, he must attend to the demands of the Jewish leaders in order to keep peace in this part of the Empire. Note it well. Tell them, scribe."

Pilate once more assumed his seat at the head of the table. "Sit, Claudia," he commanded. Then, lowering his tone to a whisper, he croaked, "Let us act the part, dear one. Let not this dead man destroy your peace nor our visitor see you in despair."

The woman gave a sigh, an attempt to breathe out the pent-up fears. Then, somewhat mollified, she took her place next to her husband.

"Uh, hem...ah sire," Valerius whispered. "Caiaphas demands an audience at once. It seems the body of the Nazarene...is missing."

Cornelius sat up, alert, and solemn.

Sam, too, started at the news. He was familiar with this scene—the movie version of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. "Next comes Caiaphas," Sam muttered to himself.

Pilate stood and slammed his hands down upon the table, causing it to quake under his blow. "You posted the guards!" he bellowed, pointing a trembling finger at his aide. "You, Tribune! I suggest *you* find these men! The punishment is death, Tribune," he hissed, his face red with rage. "You know this? Do you?"

Valerius was now at a loss for words, seemingly stunned by the abrupt change of events. He backed away. "At once. I will seek them at once," he whimpered, wasting no small effort to maintain his dignity.

"And send the fattened overseer of the Temple treasury to me!" Pilate added with contempt and force enough for anyone in the palace to hear.

"Yes, sire," the sniveling aristocrat in military uniform answered as he made a hasty retreat from the dining room.

"These people and their Gods!" Pilate growled while half-heartedly poking a morsel of flat



bread into his mouth and again taking his seat. “Our Gods are sensible. Correct me if I am wrong, guest Antonius, but our Gods simply do not get in the way! Is that not so? When was the last time a God of Rome created a scandal? Hum?”

Sam, summoning all the diplomatic tact he’d garnered over four decades of reporting, sought to appease the fiery Pilate seated before him. “Roman Gods indeed do not get in the way. Quite convenient, really,” he said. In truth, he was rather enjoying the pageant being presented to him. *The best performance I’ve ever seen*, he thought silently, contemplating the visual spectacle of the Easter story his mind was witnessing while his body slept.

“Yes, yes! Convenient Gods! And that is the wisdom and greatness of Rome—convenience! We do things with the end in mind, for the peace and prosperity of the Empire. I once brought shields to the temple, shields upon which the Roman eagle was emblazoned in tribute to the *divine* Tiberius. I marched them through Jerusalem, and you would think I was starting the city ablaze! The uproar! Ha!” He paused to spit, expelling in proxy a trace of the bitterness awash inside him. “Chastised by Tiberius himself, I finally took them down and stored them. The eagle! The Jewish leaders said it was sacrilege, mind you. Ha!”

Claudia fidgeted. Her raw nerves had reduced her to a sullen and tearful hostess of Rome.

“So *that* is why you are here!” Pilate accused, his ire directed at Sam. He stood and approached his puzzling guest. Both Sam and Cornelius countered by respectfully standing. “You are here to spy for Tiberius, hum?” he alleged, passing his hand across a strong, clean-shaven jaw. He stopped, once more pondering where all this might lead, postulating further upon the impossible nature of his governance of such a people; rambling on about power struggles within the court.

In self-talk, Pilate began again. “If I am correct, Tiberius has heard of this enchanted man, this magic healer Jesus. I, of course, had him killed. Against my will, mind you.” He made a point of repeating it for who he supposed to be a senate scribe.

“Against my will!” Pilate added for emphasis. “But then, how would Tiberius know that?” he inquired to no one in particular. “Well, no matter. I did it,” he glumly concluded. “In the end, I will be blamed. And all to satisfy the bloodlust of the mob. So, Tiberius would have had me do... what? Send the magic man to Rome, where he could then heal Tiberius of his infirmities? Would he himself then act as judge, whether the man be a traitor, a threat to Rome?”

Pilate turned to face Sam. “I have never heard of you before. No one enters Palestine from the seaport or by land from Rome without my knowledge. So...you may be more dangerous than a spy. Here to replace me, perhaps? No...not even Tiberius would allow anything but a grand entry

for the next Governor, his divine representative.” He stopped, strolled a few paces. “Then who are you, Samuel, man with the Hebrew given name and Roman surname?” Pilate allowed for the silence, even as shouting in Aramaic could be heard from the anteroom without the dining hall.

“Sire,” Valerius announced, almost stumbling through the doorway. “I beg your pardon, sire. It does appear the Jew, Caiaphas the High Priest, requires your Excellency’s presence.”

“Well, Samuel. Perhaps you would like to report this to Rome.” He motioned for him to follow, but for Cornelius to stay. “No, on second thought, I will require your services as well, Centurion. Come!”

Claudia, mentally and physically exhausted, followed, keeping a respectful distance. She needed to be nearby, needed whatever new information she could glean, seeking to somehow regain her former sense of sanity.

“Your Highness, Governor Pilate. It is early. I beg your forgiveness for this intrusion. I...”

The Procurator cut him off. “Do you never weary of intrigue, Joseph Caiaphas?”

“It is not intrigue I seek. Quite the opposite. I seek the peace of the people, for the Empire’s sake.”

“Ha! Your own skin and the bags of money you have stashed in the cushions where you sit your well-fed, amply robed posterior! For the Empire’s sake, indeed! You care nothing for the Empire. So, get on with it!” he tersely demanded.

“We have suffered a humiliation. I take full blame. The guards you sent must simply have been overworked. They apparently slept and...”

*You paid them off,* Sam thought. *Last chapter in the Gospel of John.* He looked to Cornelius, who was on edge now, taking in every carefully chosen word.

“So, the followers of this Jesus have stolen his body,” continued Caiaphas. “It is your duty to find these men and have them imprisoned. Better yet, they shall stand trial and be put to the same treasonous end that the false prophet was.”

“No, Caiaphas. I will not allow you to do your dirty work through me. If they merit stoning, do it. But never again will I allow your midnight courts of justice to use the Roman Empire as tools to dispose of dogmatic preachers you deem troublemakers. Never!” he shouted.

Caiaphas shuffled his feet, but kept a firm gaze on Pilate. “With all due respect for the bother I have caused you, and having acknowledged the part I have played in it, I must insist we bring a swift hand to remedy this matter. You see, Governor, this dead man Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, capable of raising the dead! His followers mock you, and me,” he whined. “They have taken his body, no doubt buried it in an unmarked grave, and now will shout throughout all

Palestine that he, Jesus of Nazareth, has risen; has come back from the dead.”

“With his body? His dead, crucified body?” Pilate asked, incredulous. “The people you claim to lead will believe such utter nonsense?”

“It is not nonsense to them. They are unwavering in their belief. There has been more than one purported ‘miracle’ of raising others from the dead. His friend, Lazarus of Bethany, is one such story. Many witnesses claim...but it is all a matter of publicity for their own cause,” he said. “So, you see, these followers *are* dangerous!”

“I would not want to be your enemy, Caiaphas. It is you who is dangerous,” Pilate stated directly as he paced a circle around the man. “What say you, Samuel Antonius?”

Sam looked to Cornelius, who evinced no sign of facial expression nor distinguishable body language to tell Sam how to respond. He remained stiff, eyes to the front, but fixed with daggers and contempt for the High Priest.

Sam nodded toward Caiaphas. “May I ask of this man, your High Priest, a few pointed questions?”

“Most certainly,” Pilate said, lips biting down hard in scorn. “Ask anything you like.”

“Governor Pilate,” pled the pious High Priest, a nervous rise in his voice. “I beseech you, there is little time to waste. And who is this man to ask questions of me?”

“He is a Roman! And I will have your tongue cut out, leader of your people or not, next time you dare question my judgment! Centurion!”

Cornelius came forward, his hand on the hilt of his broadsword, drawing it from the sheath.

Caiaphas turned away from the brawny soldier and bowed his head before Sam. Through pursed lips he disdainfully said, “Please, ask anything you wish.”

Sam’s nod sent Cornelius’s sword back into its sheath. Drawing a cleansing breath, Sam took his place before Caiaphas. “Jesus of Nazareth was tried at night, was he not?” he asked.

“Yes, but...”

“And that is strictly forbidden by Jewish law, is it not?”

“There are cases that...”

“No, there are not. None, in fact. This was a first. Certainly, during your rule, yes?” The blaze that was lit in Sam’s eyes bore into the Priest’s. “Well?”

“Yes,” Caiaphas finally answered. “But there were circumstances which...”

“None of that!” Pilate bellowed. “We’ve already endured your litany of *why* the man was a blasphemer and a traitor. Just answer with *yea* or *nay*, Caiaphas.”

Sam continued. “And you are required to conduct a trial before the Sanhedrin?”

“Members were present.”

“But not all, and not in the chambers of the Sanhedrin, but in your own house. Is that not so?”

“Yes. But I am the High Priest. In my words and those of the council reside the law,” he spat back.

“So it was a covert trial, and Jewish law honors the public nature, the daylight nature, the presumptive innocence of a man under condemnation and arrest. Yea or nay?”

Caiaphas fell silent.

“How is it that in your words of law no court should be convened but in public and not before the morning sacrifice, and must end by evening sacrifice. Yet, this tribunal of the condemned Jesus was held, I’ll repeat it once again, *after* the evening sacrifice, and hardly public.”

“Citizens were present,” he countered. “In fact, two of the condemned’s followers were reported there.”

“No death sentence may be pronounced without a defender at hand. Unanimous consent for capital punishment on the same day of the trial, and without representation, is tantamount to acquittal. Is it not so?”

“In some areas you seem knowledgeable. I am amazed at your familiarity with Jewish law. May I ask your name and profession, sir?” Caiaphas diplomatically rejoined.

“Samuel Antonius. I am a reporter.”

“Oh, reporter now is a profession?” the High Priest mocked. “I see...”

“‘They shall not judge on the eve of a Sabbath, nor on that of any festival.’ That is found in your Mishna. It is you who is guilty of a crime, sir.” He paused and stepped back, allowing the High Priest his answer.

Sam had recalled without seeming exertion the words of an interview he had done the year before. He’d felt compelled to read the entire book before the interview. Now its pages were brought to mind effortlessly, word for word. *The Illegal Trial of Jesus — From a Jurist’s Bench* had been released that first week in December and been on the bestseller charts for four months running.

When next Sam’s gaze met that of the High Priest, Caiaphas had closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, seething. Clenched fists clutched tightly at his side. Face explosive with anger, he turned to Pilate and cried, “Do not listen to this man!”

“The deed is done, Caiaphas. Would that I could raise Jesus myself from the dead just to see your face,” returned Pilate, grinning in contempt.

Valerius had purposely stepped back from the fray, taking in all the political ramifications of this event. Knowing he was ultimately accountable for the guards, he attempted now to remedy the defect by taking the offensive and regaining Pilate's confidence. "I have taken the guards into custody, sire. They will be punished according to law. They are in chains already, and bound for the salt pits in lower Judea. What better form of death than this?"

Pilate waved him off, instantly seeing through the nonsense.

Caiaphas, though remaining mute, questioned this new information with his eyes. He, himself, had paid them handsomely – had sent them east in merchant's clothing and with documents of the court so that they would not be recognized. He had even allowed them ten years' legionnaire pay and a yearly stipend for their silence. If Valerius had in truth intercepted them, however, there could be trouble.

"Let us conclude the matter," the High Priest put forward in a last-ditch effort to sway Pilate. "You have need for peace, and an end to rebellion. I have need for peace, and an end to heretics." Then he ended his remarks by flashing a sneering gaze in Sam's direction and saying, "I hope your stay is a *short* one, *reporter* Samuel Antonius."

"Tribune Valerius," commanded Pilate, "see to this man's complaint, then bring the guards to me."

"I shall, your Excellency. I have charged the Centurion's band with their security." He smiled, bowed, and gave a cunning glance in Cornelius's direction.

Cornelius nodded, imparting no hint of fear. Whether Valerius's story was true or false, he knew that, for now at least, the man had him clearly in his sights. If he lied, Valerius could charge Quintus and those under him with dereliction of duty and, by way of default, he Cornelius, would fall. But if Quintus indeed still had the men in his charge, then he, Cornelius, was safe. The Centurion sensed it was the latter. Quintus was the best; a match for ten men.

"Good day, your Excellency," Caiaphas purred as he followed Valerius out of the room, pleased that he had the Tribune, assistant to the Procurator himself, to turn to in search of the followers of Jesus.

Cornelius now ventured to speak. "Sire?"

"Speak, Centurion," Pilate ordered as he returned to the table to sit with his wife, who, though forlorn and under considerable anxiety, had taken in the proceedings with interest.

Cornelius, unflustered by the recent turn of events, spoke boldly. "With due respect, sire, I am unsure how Valerius could find the missing guards, put them in my care, and all this only moments before you, yourself, found out about their failings at their post. With respect for the

Tribune, of course.”

Pontius Pilate smiled. He rubbed at his eyes then sought to comfort Claudia, her hands wrapped in his as she quietly sobbed. “I have not risen through the ranks for being a fool, Centurion. I will deal with Valerius myself.” He stood, stretched, parted the sheer lace curtains with one hand, and gazed out to the courtyard below, now bustling with soldiers. “That is, if Rome does not deal with me first,” he mumbled to himself.

Cornelius came to Pilate’s defense. “I am your witness, sire. You tried to do justice. I will testify to that.”

“Yes, yes. Well, you are a man of your word. I have no doubts. Your father is well known for his integrity. So, I will charge you with this: Take this man away from here before he falls into the wrong hands. Caiaphas has guards of his own. People disappear. Do you understand me?”

“Indeed, sire,” Cornelius replied. “And what of the followers, sire, if you do not mind my asking?”

Pilate turned. “I know of your good intentions, Centurion. I know also about the so-called miracle.”

Cornelius flashed him a questioning look.

“Yes, of your servant; that this Jesus healed him, restoring him to full health by a single word. Stories such as this cannot help your advancement and should not get back to Rome. Anyway, I do not believe in the superstitious. It was fate that healed your servant, not faith. However, my men are free to believe as they will. One additional God for Rome cannot hurt. But I warn you, Centurion, do not put yourself beyond my reach to help you. Take care with these so-called disciples; these followers of the crucified Jesus, that the net which is cast to trap them does not snare you as well. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sire. I understand.”

“And as for you, Samuel Antonius,” Pilate uttered in soft, but all too cautionary tones, “you are not all you pretend to be. You defied Caiaphas. You played the advocate for a dead man you do not even know. You appear on the second morn after his death and pretend to have never been here, to have known nothing, to have come direct from Rome. You, sir, are more than you say you are,” Pilate asserted.

“I have skills,” Sam adroitly replied.

“I give you a commission then. Let us test you. When you finish your report to Rome, deliver a copy of such language used in it to me. Let us name the report, shall we?” Pilate posed as he searched for the proper words. Just then Claudia whispered something in his ear. He nodded.

“Let us title it *Fama Christus*,” he said.

Samuel nodded and in reply acknowledged the Latin ‘Fama’ as report and ‘Christus’ for the Christ. “*The Christ Report* it shall be then,” he affirmed to the Procurator.

“I would admonish you to keep this business to yourself as I inquire further about you... Leave me! My head aches from all this foolishness.”

Cornelius snapped a salute. Pilate sunk back into the cushioned chair near his wife. Sam bowed respectfully and followed Cornelius out the way they had come.

“Centurion Cornelius,” Pilate called as they reached the door. “Fear nothing of Valerius. Yes, I know of his schemes against you. You won the moment you delivered the plaque and had it posted on the Nazarene’s cross at Golgotha.”

Cornelius bowed slightly. “Thank you, sire. Come Samuel Antonius.”

## THE VOICE

*Fama Christus*, he thought to himself as Samuel followed close on his heels. The last three days had been surreal for a man used to intrigue. But he, Simon Cornelius had now officially been given guardianship over this Samuel Antonius. In truth, he wished the old man would simply go away. He is *probably 50 years old!* he decided. *Men don't live that long in the empire, and if he missteps he certainly will not*, he offered in contemplative complaint. He had neither the time nor the energy to trouble himself with the soft man, the stranger who had appeared from nowhere to stir up Valerius even more against him.

He, Simon surnamed Cornelius, just wanted his life back. He didn't fancy this sort of intrigue. His wife, Rebekah of Tyre, was the jewel in his crown—the crown of a king in his own home, the only crown or glory he had ever sought. Alas, their union had been childless. He would have done anything to have offspring; to know the joy of fathering a son and daughter. And, indeed, the most beautiful babies would have issued from her womb.

At one time, he had entertained the thought that inasmuch as the Master had healed his servant, that he might invite Him to his home on the coast one day, and there see his wife blessed. She had not been a believer until that day Jahath was raised from his deathbed. Jahath was a slave, a servant granted him of his adopted father, the famed Consul, Senator Lucius Cornelius Lentulus. But to him, Jahath was his best of friends, an equal who one day would have his papers drawn up, granting him his freedom.

So, on that day Rebekah had seen with her own eyes the workings of the Nazarene, and had begun listening to the story of the how Jesus of Galilee preached words of peace, kindness, and brotherhood for all mankind. He did miracles only a prophet could do. Soon he, Cornelius, would be back in Rebekka's embrace, and he would personally tell her of the awful events—how he had removed Jesus tenderly from the cross, had turned the body over to the merchant Joseph of Aramathea, kin to Mary, the mother of the Jesus.

He recalled the words that so spontaneously poured from the Savior's lips moments before His death. The sky had blackened, the earth shook to its center, thunder had roiled in the heavens, and lighting had sent its tentacle arms across the starless firmament. He was standing next to Quintus, his right hand in the business of that day.

The crucified one had groaned, calling out simply, "*It is finished!*" Cornelius was strangely



aware at that moment that, for him and his household, “it” had only begun. “Truly, this man was the Son of God,” he had unashamedly uttered aloud for all to hear.

For that spoken declaration, and for the words carved upon the plaque, he would have to deal with the suspicious and ladder-climbing Valerius. He turned his attention now to Samuel as they exited the Fortress. “You presented yourself as a lawyer of the court. How did you know about the events of the Passover eve?”

“I am a student, an observer by nature. I have sources.”

They walked the halls in silence, down a staircase, along a long corridor, through a dining hall, and finally to a small chamber of spartan accommodation.

“Well, you must have some faith in the Master, or you would not have been so adversarial with Caiaphas. It is not safe for you now,” intoned Cornelius, who stopped to gather a cloak from his quarters in the fortress. “I must not be seen alone on the streets in uniform. My men cannot accompany us, where we are heading,” he added. “Here,” he said, tossing a thick woolen garment toward Samuel. “This cloak with hood should fit you as well,” he said as he grabbed two from his closet. “We must blend in.”

The centurion set his helmet aside, kept his uniform, sword, and dagger hidden under the cloak, and ordered, “Follow me.” The two men exited the well-manned garrison with orders from Pilate in hand for any sentry or Roman patrol who they might encounter on this quiet, but dangerous night in Jerusalem. “Don your hood,” he commanded Samuel as they exited the gates of fortress Antonia.

“I wish I could go home,” Samuel lamented as they proceeded south, toward an upper room where Cornelius had determined to go.

“Your wife? She does not travel with you?”

“Not on this trip. We were to leave for rest and relaxation to some islands, when I suffered a heart attack.”

“Your heart is not well?”

“No. I’m not sure it will ever be well. I just need to get through this nightmare somehow and wake up seeing Joy.”

“Joy...” Cornelius returned. “Now there is a fitting word for what we all seek.”

“Indeed,” Sam replied.

“You must have faith, Samuel. If you believed, as I do now in God’s power, you would be healed.”

“You really believe that?”

“I have seen it with my own two eyes and have had dozens of reports verified by those who were supposed to have been healed. None flinched at a Roman officer’s interrogation.”

“That does say something,” Sam answered.

“Indeed. But you are the intellectual sort who must see to believe,” Cornelius answered back, resting his fingertips next to his eyes.

“How else?”

“Faith comes expressly *before* the miracle, else why call it faith? The Master taught that very tenet and paid me an honor I shall always hold dear,” explained Cornelius. “He said, ‘*Such great faith I have not seen, no not in all of Israel.*’ I have never forgotten that. He changed me. Then and there, the crude skeptic of Rome became the willing student; the open believer.”

Sam let out a sigh. “My wife believes like you do. Always talking about how I’m not a *whole* person without God.”

“So, she has heard of our Lord already?”

“The word gets around,” Sam answered.

“My wife is Rebekah. I dream every night that she sleeps in my arms. I long to wake every day with her,” the sturdy Roman wistfully replied. “Your wife awaits in Rome, mine in Caesarea.”

Sam shook his head.

“You cannot talk of it. Well, I understand. I will leave you alone in the matter. I am taking you to the followers. Cleopas should be there, waiting, with answers regarding the body of Jesus.”

Sam’s curiosity spilled over concerning one matter: “Why do they call you *the friend*?” he asked.

“I requested the moniker. It is a distinct honor used by Jews everywhere for a Gentile who protects and defends them. I cannot divulge my loyalties, although Pilate and Valerius have me correctly divined. But still, if I am not known by name, I have no accusers. I am a deliveryman for the Empire. I transport goods safely with my one hundred soldiers across roads which thieves roam. As such, I felt I could benefit my Jewish brothers and carry messages between cities for them as well. I cannot hope to be one with them in the faith. I am not a Jew by birthright. But then...with the prophet dead, it avails little.”

“A *friend* is *one* in faith. I have many Jewish friends at home. We are known as you and I know each other. Perceive a man as a brother and he is your brother, simple as that,” Sam found himself adding.

“Wise,” nodded the Centurion. “Good words. You are a strange man and Pilate is correct. You are more than what you have claimed to be, Samuel Antonius.” They turned a corner. “Here,

through this alley,” motioned Cornelius. “It will offer a shorter route. Along here we shall find believers if we need them. Let us be silent now.”

The hush of their route was punctuated only by the closing of window shutters, the cackle of hens, the occasional barking of a dog, the cries of children within the walls on either side of them. They now ventured into the back streets of any number of middle-east cities Sam might have seen featured in a National Geographic TV Special.

Sam was first to break the silence. “Who took the body?” he asked.

Cornelius wanted the truth as much as any man regarding the burial of Jesus. Why had the guards left their posts? Where would the body have been taken? And by whom? He flashed Sam a brief scowl of disapproval and said under muffled breath, “That is what we are going to find out.”

“Halt!” a commanding voiced rang out from behind them as they passed through one of several shadowy passageways.

Cornelius spun around, drew his sword, threw off his hood, and posted himself in front of Sam. Men with spears appeared at both ends of the narrow walkway; a Roman officer at the lead of the group farthest from the two travelers.

“Valerius! What goes here?” called Cornelius.

“On a hunt for traitors! Perhaps you, Centurion!”

“Make your case quickly, Tribune, or let us pass. I am on business for Pilate.”

“So, escorting a spy for the Senate is an errand for Pilate?”

“Make your case known or let us pass,” repeated Cornelius. “Here,” he said to Sam, withdrawing a dagger from his belt and offering Sam its hilt. “You may need this.”

Sam took hold of the slender, silvery blade. The closest he had ever come to using a knife was the previous year while carving the Thanksgiving turkey. Even then, he had bungled the job. He doubted whether he had the ability to use it. Frightened now, Sam didn’t understand how, amid this crazy, meandering dreamscape, he had come to feel this emotion. “Wake up, Sam,” he muttered.

“Yes, I believe I will make my case,” Valerius continued. “One, you are a supporter of this Jesus and his followers. Two, you conspired with the man’s supporters to bribe the guards, who, under your authority, left their posts at the dead man’s sepulcher. Three, you and this man,” he uttered with contempt, pointing to Sam, “are headed to warn the followers even now, so that they might make their escape,” Tribune Valerius spit out as he approached; broadsword drawn.

“Be sure you know how to use it, Valerius,” Cornelius mocked.

On Valerius’s signal, the guards from either end of the dark alleyway crept forward,

effectively fencing in Cornelius and Sam, inch by inch.

“I am warning you, Tribune. I am on official business. You will answer to Pilate.”

“In truth? And what will I answer for? Let us see... Centurion Cornelius is nowhere to be found. It is rumored he disappeared with the guards who abandoned their posts. It is rumored that the followers of this Jesus bought him off as well...” Valerius saw that Cornelius’s anger was evident in his eyes, and by the tightening of his grip upon the hilt of his sword. He continued with his taunt.

“Joseph of Aramathea is a wealthy man, after all. He provided the tomb. How convenient.” Valerius glared at his adversary, now at the distance of sword tips. “But then, with you and this Roman imposter here gone, this will all blow over rather quickly.”

“Strike first, Valerius. I beg you. Strike,” Cornelius answered. He knew some of the guards; and he also knew they would side with the winner of this contest—if for nothing else, to save their own skins.

“You keep bad company, Centurion. You are a threat to Rome, as well. I have checked. There is no Samuel Antonius, Librarian of the Senate! And for treachery,” he growled, “you both shall pay!” Walled in, and with little room to shift from side to side, Valerius raised his sword high over his head, but not before the Centurion took advantage.

Cornelius was already positioned with his sword held at a right angle from his body. Tip pointed to Valerius’s midsection, it was a simple matter to lunge and disembowel the arrogant Tribune before his sword came down. But that would cause his father harm in Rome. One powerful Senator’s son killing another’s...

As if on instinct, he employed a trick he recalled from his training days as a cadet in the Legion’s Officer Corps: lunge between the legs, bring the sword up, broadside against thigh and threaten to twist; that is, slice the main artery in the upper thigh, or at the other angle, cut masculine anatomy from the man, leaving him no chance of procreating. No man alive will continue the fight, but will either beg for mercy or bleed to death.

The Centurion’s sword found its mark with sudden and startling force. Valerius froze mid-swing, his own sword still held aloft. Stunned, his face revealed his instant agony and vulnerability.

“How would you like to be remembered, Valerius?” derided Cornelius, the tip of his sword pressed up against the man’s lower groin, its broadside angled at forty-five degrees. Disinclined to waste precious seconds with talk, he thrust it forward a bit, drawing a trickle of blood from the inner left thigh; a flesh wound, but nonetheless convincing. “Hum? Will it be hen or rooster,

Valerius?”

At last, one of the guards could contain himself no longer. He let out a muffled guffaw, followed by another, until the hooting and hollering from the two Roman squads echoed up and down the passageway. “Hen!” one laughed aloud.

Cornelius, however, yet felt at risk. “Tell them to back off,” he snarled, “or I will make you sorry you ever thought of raising the sword against me!”

The Tribune’s eyes widened. He quickly considered the cold intent of the Centurion, hoping to come across some way to save face.

Cornelius intensified the upward pressure of his blade. “Drop the sword. Or would you rather I move mine? Just a bit to one side and I slice your main artery; up and to the right and I ruin your aspirations for progeny. You may die here now, Valerius. Do you think these,” he said with a subtle sweep of his off hand in front of the guards both in front and back, “care who wins? They go with the one who walks away. Drop the sword or I swear I shall...”

Valerius straightway let his sword fall from his hand, sending it clattering to the cobblestoned passageway.

“Now, order them to retreat.”

“To your posts,” Valerius squealed. The soldiers, still trying to confine the humor they’d found in Cornelius’s gambit, retreated, and soon disappeared.

“Samuel!” he called. “Retrace your steps to the nearest door behind you. Knock, offer them coins for silence, and wait for me.”

Sam, just then regaining an awareness of all that had transpired in the previous few minutes, obeyed. Knocking, he found himself suddenly entering a dark room, three women peering at him from behind veiled faces. Dropping the dagger which he yet clutched, Sam stretched out his hand toward them, offering up a handful of coins taken from the purse attached to his belt.

The women backed away, huddling in one corner. With the door slightly ajar, he gazed back out into the narrow alleyway to the scene being played out.

“Now, Tribune, it is I who will dispatch you!” he heard his Centurion friend angrily spit out. “And you will be the man accused of this rebellion of the guards. It is you whose bones will be scattered upon the sands of the desert after dogs have feasted upon your worm-eaten flesh. It will be said that the Tribune died at the hand of Zealots, following Pilate’s orders; this to save face in Rome for your father’s sake—and for mine. But we know the truth. You have met the match of your life, Tribune Valerius. Where are the witnesses? Where did they go? Hum?”

Valerius’s face registered the shock and dread of a man about to meet a certain and

ignominious death. Cornelius was caught up in a rage. He had been attacked. And now he was in a position he might never again know: an opportunity, and a just one at that, to do away with his tormentor. The weight from possible consequences was lost to him now as he let the tip of his weapon wander up and down Valerius's leg, pressing ever harder, enjoying the spectacle of his squirming enemy.

"*Friend?*" a familiar voice called out. The voice came from beyond Valerius; from the eastern end of the dark alley. The silhouette of a man at the end of the shadowy corridor caused him to pause. Maintaining the sword's pressure against the inner thigh of the Tribune, Cornelius stole a brief glance past his adversary in the direction of the shadowy figure.

The man's speech rang out once more—a most pleasant voice. "*Simon Cornelius...*"

"I know that voice," Cornelius quietly offered in self-talk. He relaxed the pressure put to the sword. His face lightened. He did indeed recognize the voice! He had heard it before, more than enough to understand what it demanded of him. And the last time its calming influence had graced his ears had been but two days before—there, on the hill, at the place of the skull.

"*Cornelius. Follow me,*" the vocal power from the far end of the corridor softly commanded.

The awestruck Centurion withdrew the sword, pointed Valerius in the opposite direction, nudged him on his way with his right foot kicking at his rear, and struck out for the voice and the light surrounding it.

## THE WOMEN

“I mean no harm,” Sam said to the terrified women crouching in the corner. “I will leave these coins here for you.”

Cornelius knocked, then pushed the door open all the way. “Samuel. Make haste. We go to find Cleopas, and—”

“Friend... Centurion? Is that you?” one of the women cried out.

“Mary? Is that the voice of Mary of Emmaus?” he answered with surprise. “I knew some of the women followers lived nearby. But how? Why are you...?”

“Is my Cleopas safe? Alive?” she asked as she stood and emerged into the light of the open door. “So many things have happened. So much in so little time!”

“He is,” he said softly, kindly. “Cleopas is well. Mary, what are you doing here? I thought you were with the mother and the other Mary of Magdala.”

Sam wondered at the spectacle. One minute a Roman bent on slaughtering his adversary, the next a mild gentleman determined to save and protect innocent friends.

“Did you see him?” Mary asked.

Another came forward. “Yes, did you see him? He appeared to us. At first, we thought it a ghost.”

“Joanna! And Salome?” Cornelius exclaimed.

“We saw him,” Salome said excitedly. “No one wants to believe us.”

“Him? Of whom do you speak?” he meekly questioned.

Joanna drew even more near, saying: “The Master. In the garden. Early this morn,” she whispered with reverence.

“You went to the tomb? Where were the guards? Do you know who took the body? I need to help find Him, secure His resting place. I..”

“They mean they saw Him *alive*, Centurion,” exclaimed Sam. “*Risen, as he said he would.*”

“Yes. Yes,” Mary added excitedly. “Those very words! A heavenly man sat there, seated on the slab of stone where the Master’s body lay. He used those very words. How, kind sir, did you know?” she asked, turning to Sam. “Did you see him too?”

“This is Samuel Antonius...from Rome.” Cornelius spoke in clipped tone, still astonished, it seemed, by the favorable turn of events. “He has been with me...with me the entire night and

day. I found him at the inn with Cleopas in Emmaus. What you said, though. I am confused by it. You are not speaking of Jesus. Surely, he cannot be alive!”

“Why, yes. The Master, Jesus!” Mary cried, the delight in her voice rising with each joy-filled phrase. “He has risen! We saw him with our own eyes. At the garden tomb. The stone was rolled back, the guards had vanished,” she said.

“Two beings in glorious white apparel spoke to us,” Mary continued. “‘He is not here,’ one said, ‘but risen as he said he would.’ Then we saw!”

“No...” Cornelius gasped. “I heard a voice just now, but thought it imagination, the kind when...”

“What?” Joanna begged. “You heard what?” she interrupted.

“His voice from...” he rushed out the open door and squinted towards the end of the alley. “Surely, it is my mind playing tricks on me.”

Sam was witnessing an extension of the drama; an additional gap in a narrative so emotion-packed, yet never recorded in the Gospels. He recalled now, though faintly, that the scriptures spoke of a number of faithful women having stood by at the crucifixion. And it had been several women, including Mary, wife of Cleopas, who had come with the other Mary, and the mother of Jesus that morning to the empty tomb. “*My God!*” Sam mouthed under his breath.

Cornelius, hearing Sam’s barely audible words, called to him. “Hurry. Make haste. Let us go to Cleopas and the others. Samuel, come!” He waved his companion out of the small city dwelling and into the alleyway.

“The streets are not yet safe, Mary. You women stay,” he gently commanded. “I will send for you this eve, with my soldiers as escort. If, by chance, I do not come, do not move from here until I or they arrive. I will notify Cleopas and whomever else I find at the home of John Mark’s family. You mustn’t share this news with anyone until we understand what is happening.”

A sense of urgency propelled Sam to pose a question. The rarest of opportunities a true skeptic could imagine, had presented itself. He directed his query to the women, “Before we go, may I ask you this? Are you certain that you saw this Jesus of Nazareth alive this day, and not some look alike?”

All three women responded as one, with a mixture of testifying tears and vigorous nods of the head. “We saw... Him! All three of us saw,” Salome answered with a catch in her voice.

“I saw,” Mary added. “I know my Master well. It was He.”

“I too beheld his presence,” Joanna said.

“This was not some spirit, a ghost, a vision?” Sam asked.



Cornelius paid careful attention to Sam's interrogatories.

"He looked real. Mary of Magdala, as well, saw him, separate from us. And Mary his mother saw what we saw. A mother surely knows her own son! How could it be anything but what He said—that He would rise from the dead on the third day?" Mary of Emmaus, Cleopas' wife, gently assured.

"Samuel," Cornelius interrupted. "We must hurry. My services are needed. The followers' lives are in danger. If this gets out to Caiaphas, that these women saw Him, or believe they did, then no one is safe. We must hurry. Come."

"You saw?" Sam asked once more.

Mary approached him, and in a voice unflinching and calm said, "Sir, I swear to you this: I saw my Master, Jesus of Nazareth, alive. Now go tell my husband Cleopas."

Sam gazed into her eyes for any trace of deception. His eyes moistened. He thought of Joy's eyes. These were like hers. He had always been able to read eyes. In these he found the sure knowledge that only the pure in heart know. She believed what she said.

Cornelius called from the door. "Samuel! It is time for you to report. Let us hurry! Come!"

## THE DISCIPLES

Cleopas was a man overwhelmed by sorrow. The Master's body had been taken; his wife was missing; the disciples were just gathering.

A rumor, a fantastic tale of several women—perhaps one being his own wife—had reported seeing Jesus alive. Upon hearing the report, Peter and John had rushed to the tomb. John, full of love and anxiety, together with the despairing Peter, now mingled with hope, were not expected back at least until they could meet with the women of Bethany.

Cleopas was now at the home of John Mark, doing what he did best: preparing a meal for the followers who might arrive. He wanted to do something, anything, to help comfort his friends and brethren. But all this talk of resurrection—a preposterous, fantastic idea, was likely the unrealistic expectations of the youthful and beloved John and John Mark, who was even now at the near empty marketplace purchasing victuals.

The innkeeper wagged his weary head. He should have gone directly to Bethany the night previous; to be there with his wife. It was late, however, and too dangerous for an even remotely accused of association with “the Jesus rebellion,” as the high priest had called it. Pacing the floor now, he answered a knock at the door. “Matthew, have you heard?”

“Shalom, Cleopas. I have heard. Even if it were true, I was a coward. I ran. I suppose the rest of the brethren are here?” he asked hopefully.

“You are the first.”

“Oh. May I rest?”

“Of course. Please,” he motioned. “Pillows,” he said, pointing to one corner. “I am preparing supper. Soon we expect to hear from John and Peter. They went to the tomb.”

“I passed by the house of Martha. She told me what the women saw. She said that your Mary was there.”

“Is she there? My Mary? Is she safe?” an anxious Cleopas questioned.

“I did not see her. Someone said she had gone into Jerusalem, not far from here. The home of Salome and Joanna.”

Cleopas dashed up the stairs to the upper window. Through partially closed shutters he peered out, knowing his beloved might be just streets apart from him. He deliberated in self-talk, partly to calm his nerves. *Should I go to her? I promised to wait for Cornelius.*

Matthew slumped back onto a pillow, putting his hands to his head. “I never thought he would die. Not really. I believed he was the Messiah, come to unshackle Israel from the bonds of Rome and the false King Herod. But this tale told by the women. Fantastic...” He reclined against the wall in ponderous silence, eyes closed.

Cleopas paced, wondering, trying to fathom this notion of a resurrection. It was an ancient teaching, and one sometimes alluded to by Jesus. But he had not understood it to mean that one who dies actually is restored to his body. No, that had been but a metaphor for living forever in one’s glorified, perfected spirit body. *What if... What if He were the Son of God, truly?*

Knowing that more of the followers likely would be arriving soon to this place where they last dined with the Master, Cleopas hesitated to leave; yet, he wanted to go find his Mary. Still, he stayed put. This would be the place they would congregate—all of them to muse on the latest events, consider the next steps, examine these reports from the women.

“It is true!” John Mark called as he rushed up the steps from the tiny courtyard below. “He is not in the tomb!” he cried, his face fairly beaming. “He is risen!”

A knock came from below.

“Romans? Temple guard perhaps come to arrest us?” Matthew ventured, awakened now from his reverie.

“I will go see,” John Mark offered. “He is risen as He said He would,” the young man added with glee.

“Careful, lad,” Cleopas urged.

A quiet moment lapsed. Cleopas stationed himself just inside the upper door, meat cleaver in hand, willing to defend Matthew if necessary. Whispers issued from below. Seeming to recognize the voices, he relaxed his grip.

“Romans, indeed,” reported John Mark, smiling as he entered. Behind him loomed the massive frame of Centurion Cornelius and Samuel Antonius.

“Friend!” Cleopas cried. “And Samuel?” he said, dropping the jagged kitchen utensil.

Sam nodded and stood aside to take in this long-anticipated reunion. He patted his chest and arms with his hands. Strangely solid. Again, he wondered how long this night of dreams would last.

Cornelius greeted his fellow believer. “I am glad to see you, Cleopas. I bring news. Your wife is with Joanna and Salome. We just came from the place where they reside. They are safe. I instructed them to be still and remain there until this day passes.”

“Well, then. Thank you, Centurion!” said Cleopas, taking the other’s hand in a firm grip of

brotherhood. "I knew I could count on you! Ever our friend!"

"The women may have saved us. Some treachery and maneuver by Tribune Valerius and his guards blindsided Samuel and I as we passed this way. Fortuitous it was, that precisely where the women were, Samuel could take refuge whilst I troubled with Valerius."

"Did you kill him?" posed an eager John Mark.

"No, and you mustn't wish it, although I admit that in self-defense it might have been the case," he said, adding, "A voice stopped me as I readied to dispatch the devil."

"A voice?" Cleopas questioned. "Who's voice?"

"I cannot be sure. But it was familiar, and he called me by name as he stood at the end of the street. He also called me servant and *friend*. I was suddenly disarmed."

"By Valerius?" John Mark asked.

"No, by the voice. I let Valerius depart in peace. He knows he was beaten. He will not try anything further for a long while. His pride must recover first. But the voice...his words..." Cornelius's ruminations trailed off and the room went still in anticipation.

Finally, Cleopas piped up. "And news? You said you bring news? Did it have to do with this voice?"

Matthew yet lounged in the corner. Silent, only now did he stir, sitting upright to listen.

"News of Pilate?" John Mark interjected. "Will they come after us?" He appeared excited at the prospect, as if eager for the plot to thicken.

"Pilate wishes nothing more than all of this to go away. It is the High Priest and his fellows who stir the pot of trouble. They claim the followers stole the body and bribed the guards. Pilate believes they did, so for now the matter is at an impasse. I believe all will be quiet for several days, each party hoping to make the other stumble, each sending out spies."

The Centurion's mind drifted to another topic, and he turned to face Sam, saying nothing, pensive, as if a sudden thought occurring to him had wrought another puzzle piece and caused it to fit where it should.

"And my wife? She will not accompany us to Emmaus?" posed Cleopas.

"No, she will stay. I am sorry, Cleopas. But I took it upon myself. It is better. We should leave soon."

"And Samuel? You have not stayed with the Procurator and your fellows. I do not understand."

"Nor do I," replied the librarian-reporter. "So, this is the place. The last supper was here?" Sam's tone one of reverence.

All stopped and turned to him, questioning him with their eyes. *How would he know?* Even Cornelius had not mentioned it, nor was he sure of it.

“Who are you, sir?” implored a voice from the corner. “And what do you know of the last Passover between us? If you be friend, make yourself known.”

“Matthew, this is a gentleman who happened upon my inn,” explained Cleopas. “He knows our story. I assure you that with Cornelius here, we have no need to fear. Samuel, too, is considered our friend.”

“So be it. And welcome to you both.” Matthew turned his attention on the Centurion, who had sprawled on several pillows near the center of the room. “Though this be a day mixed with disappointment and hope, I am glad to see you well. But why do we delude ourselves?” he sullenly offered from his dim-lit seat.

Sam, his confidence rising, spoke up. “You may be surprised to know that many outside of the promised land of Israel believe in life after death,” he stated, part in earnest and part to provoke further comment, “...and that your cause is just.”

Matthew arose and ambled across the room to size Sam up. Cornelius was quiet, Cleopas brooding and pacing once more, and John Mark—ever the admirer and observer—was at-the-ready to learn—even in this dark hour—from his elders when they counseled together.

“You believe as we do, then?” Matthew asked. “That Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God? A Messiah sent to redeem Israel?”

“I know there are many believers, and the more I see and hear, the more sure I become. But as to faith, I am accustomed to seeing to believe,” he answered.

His friend the innkeeper addressed him then. “Samuel. It is not a matter of the mind, but of the heart. This is faith, which stems from hope. You must learn this if you are to report to your people.”

“So, it is. In truth, it is so,” Cornelius muttered in agreement.

Matthew, judging that Sam had spoken sincerely, let go of his doubts. “James should be here soon. Thomas, no one knows to where he fled. Philip and Andrew have gone to the fields where families gathered in camps for their return journey to the Galilee. They promised to come here directly after. As for the rest, I know not. Is our faith broken? Will Jesus return in spirit, as the women said He would?”

“They reported seeing his body; his physical body,” said Sam, “saying that he was risen from death. Death and a real body cannot coexist. Perhaps your Master is risen?” Ever the prodding interviewer, he was tempting more words from them.

“Ah, if only...” Cleopas sighed. “I must make myself useful. John Mark, please assist me. We shall boil fish and prepare the condiments, then I shall depart with our friend, Centurion Cornelius, for Emmaus.”

“Samuel will join us,” Cornelius interjected. “I have been given charge by Pilate to deliver him safely to the coast and straightway see him on a ship safely back to Rome. We must leave soon. It is mid-day and the city will be still. Perfect for our quiet departure.”

Cleopas nodded and made eye contact with Matthew, who waved him to his chores. “I will not be long.”

Sam smiled and shrugged, knowing he had no choice but to continue on... *At least until the anesthetics wear off*, he thought.

## ROAD TO EMMAUS

*And behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about three-score furlongs. And they talked together of all these things which had happened. ~Gospel of Luke 24:13-14*

So they began their short six-mile journey to the inn of Cleopas. No one had yet spoken. Sam trailed his two burly companions along the dusty road to Emmaus. The mood had been solemn and eerily peaceful—until now. Now, safely away from the precincts of Jerusalem, the two disciples Cleopas, Innkeeper of Emmaus, and Centurion Cornelius, talked quietly between themselves. Sam, keeping a respectful distance to the rear, was now the observer, as if watching a movie or play, detailed in every way but in the third person, without his presence in it.

He was beginning to realize that perhaps this was it; the price he must pay. He had feared of it all night. He *was* dead, a fact he had been unwilling to believe until now. He had died from a broken heart; a heart in part broken by years of abuse.

The excesses and hopelessness of his life had killed him. He had never really attached any meaning to Joy's appeals to become "whole," as she put it. And now he was sensing that this dream was about to end. *But to what end? What would come next? Is this my penance?* He reflected. *Do I get to go to heaven? Hell? Without Joy it might as well be,* he moodily concluded as he kept pace with the men on the road.

It seemed that they didn't even notice him now. It was as if he never existed to them. If he were dead, would this surreal movie—in which he had played a main character—end and another begin? Perhaps he was condemned to live through multiple lifetimes past in order to learn lessons he should have learned during his mortality.

His deepest reflections and most earnest desires were for one more chance to see her eyes, her smile, taste her kiss, feel her warm body nestled comfortably up against his. Now if he had even a moment of that it would seem an undeserving, but very welcome reward for enduring this—a video-like version of stories he had known with characters he had often read about while alive, but had never really cared to know.

Strange. He really liked these people. He really cared about them. He valued their simplicity, their faith, their pronounced child-like sorrow over the fate of their super-natural leader,

Jesus. He suddenly was aware of their sacrifices, their determination, their innate goodness.

*No, it was more like godliness, he thought. Imitators of one they loved and believed in.* Even he, Sam, was feeling close to...

No! He had never proved anything but the contrary. He'd run from God his entire life, had always known in his heart of hearts that there must be One, a true God out there—that the Christ story with its enduring appeal and power to convert must have something behind it...something greater than just nice words about love and brotherly kindness.

But God was a far-off deity, and *not at all convenient* to believe in. For him to have drawn near to this Jesus, he would have had to give up a lot of little pleasures, habits, and even go to church.

*God be with you till we meet again*, the line from the church hymn struck him, out of the blue. He'd heard that line sung over and over at the end of meetings attended as a child, meetings his mother had insisted he attend. Joy had even sung it to him, in practice for a solo she sang at a funeral just last week. *Such a good person*, he recalled with pride. *So giving*, he added in soliloquy.

*Maybe she will sing it at mine! I can see the Obit now*, he thought: "Sam Robertson *Unlive!*" The thought struck him with a panic he had not thought himself to possess. Pragmatic, he had always managed to push fears away, as he had pushed God away. Even throughout this night of dreams and madness, he had kept his stage presence; a sense of utter control.

*Fears... They made you think of unpleasant things. They made you contemplate things that belong to the dead and the damned*, he once told a guest on his show. *Last week! To Cardinal McIntyre!* His busy mind posed. He had uttered those exact words when the Cardinal had reminded him of what Jesus had said to his disciples: *Peace I leave with you... Peace and fear cannot exist at the same moment. I prefer peace. Don't you, Samuel?*" He had even called him Samuel, something no other guest had ever done! Sam had blown the Cardinal off. Thanked him, but pushed his kind words away. He had Joy. What better peace was there?

That was then.

But *now*... He looked up to see if his dreamland companions were still near at hand. He was surprised to see a third walking with them, some fifty meters ahead. Eager to again take in their musings, he picked up the pace, jogging almost, drawing near to take in what he could. Maybe there was something here, some thread of hope for him in this new apparition.

He approached and veered to the right side of his fellows, off the narrow dirt road on the shoulder, nearest Cornelius, who had shed his military gear for the robes of a Judean. Sam strode along in pace with him now. Cornelius didn't look up nor over to see Sam. Rather, he was deeply



pensive, eyes fixed upon the worn path at his feet, seeming to be looking for some answers there.

Sandwiched between Cleopas and Cornelius was the other man, similar in height, slighter in build than the burly Roman, clear complexioned and well-groomed from his beard to his shoulder-length locks of hair. Donning a head covering, his facial features were not distinguishable to Sam, but he spoke mildly and with earnest appreciation for the sorrow and confusion Cleopas and Cornelius shared with him.

“What is your name, friend?” asked the man, laying a hand lightly upon the Centurion’s shoulder. Cornelius didn’t flinch. Ever the proper soldier, trained to stand apart, aloof, this reaction was very unlike that of a Roman officer of the Legion. To feel the touch of a fellow traveler upon his arm or shoulder would be unthinkable. Yet, Cornelius calmly remained within this stranger’s touch.

“I am known as Centurion Cornelius. I have shed my military dress this day to accompany my friend Cleopas to his inn. I was born Simon Lazaro, in the heart of the land called Iberia. Simon Cornelius is my Roman name, given by the family who adopted me as an orphaned child. Today I feel like that first Simon, a child, more than any day I can recall.”

“You are sad,” said the stranger.

“And I am confused. He healed my servant, and...” Cornelius frowned, unsure of this melancholy and why he should open his innermost thoughts and feelings to a stranger.

“And you, my friend?” the stranger turned, leaving Cornelius deep in his own thoughts. “What name is given you?”

“I am Cleopas, an innkeeper of Emmaus, son of Jacob but raised by my uncle Simeon in Bethlehem. Trained by him to be an innkeeper there, but that was long ago, and a sorry tale, too.”

They walked a few paces more in silence. “Your hearts are much burdened. What is it that has you both so distressed?” the attentive stranger asked.

Sam stopped. His heart seemed to leap to the question. He recalled it all in an instant. He stood and watched as they moved on, then once more fell close behind them, not listening now but struggling to remember something from very long ago.

His mother had insisted on reading aloud the Bible at the dinner table each night, until she passed away in his thirteenth year. That was a bitter time. He never quite forgave God for taking her. His mind was suddenly caught up in the story he had known since childhood. It was his mother’s favorite, a tale she read and re-read perhaps two or three times each year. Certainly it was read at Christmas time, along with how the Innkeeper of Bethlehem turned the holy family away; then it was repeated again during the celebration of Easter week. She had always called it, “*the*

*greatest story never told.” Sure. Makes sense now,* Sam muttered to himself.

He was trudging along, putting one foot in front of another, but oddly lost in time and memory. He could see her plainly and heard her words. It had been years since he had visualized the image of his overworked but soft-spoken, middle-aged mother. At the dinner table just the two of them sat, with dessert put on hold until the nightly ritual was completed.

*Mother,* he mouthed sincerely—involuntarily.

He could see the crisp, printed sentences lining the crinkly, finger-worn pages of the thick family King James Bible. He saw them as if they were clearly set before him now! The onion skin sheet of this particular story—so thoroughly read and marked with his mother’s blue ink pen markings, showing where she felt special attention was needed—all those verses came back to him.

Now... Sam was here! Here with the three! Those three men from the story his mother so loved! On this road, in this dream, lying open the very chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke before his eyes!

Each word, each sentence scrolled to view now, and her voice was quietly ringing in his inner ear as if she too was reading with her little boy. He’d lost sight of his travel companions and the dirt road that was yet underfoot. His only thoughts were of his dear mother and the verses she so loved.

“Mother,” he whispered again with a smile. “Is that you?” He closed his eyes and trusted his feet to carry him from this place, following these three ancient men, to wherever the overseer of this trance intended for it to wend.

“Samuel,” she sweetly reminded. “It is your turn to read. And remember, it is not always what you *see* that matters, but what you *feel*. You can know things in your heart that your mind cannot be certain of. *Trust your heart*, Samuel. Now, read to me my favorite story; the story of two who needed to learn that very lesson.”

He was a child, curled up next to her on the sofa. The fire was aglow, its embers dancing softly behind the lattice metal screen below the mantelpiece.

This time the dessert had already been eaten. He watched his mother close her eyes as she waited for the boy to read to her from the final chapter of Luke, Chapter 24 verses 1-53:

...

*And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.*

*And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?*

*And one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?*

*And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people:*

*And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, today is the third day since these things were done. Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulcher.*

*And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive—and certain of them which were with us went to the sepulcher, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not.*

*Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.*

*And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further.*

*But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them...*

...

“Mother?” Sam said the word aloud as he came to himself in the sudden realization that he had been day-dreaming—a dream within a dream. He looked up in time to see the three men entering the inn; they had reached Emmaus! *Slow of heart to believe*, he thought.

“Hey, Cleopas! Wait!” he shouted after them. “Hey! I’m still here! Cornelius!” Hurrying to the doorway into which the three had disappeared, he peeked in. The men were alone in the room, seated cross-legged at a table that rose no higher than one foot off the floor. The stranger sat between his two friends. Pillows were scattered about the room, left by guests now departed for their homes afar off.

Sam stepped inside and ventured closer, until he stood in the shadows of the curtain

separating the dining hall from the serving area. *Strange*, he thought. *All night, perhaps for days, I am companion to these two men in a surgically sedated illusion, and now it is as if I don't even exist.*

Now something new did take hold of him, causing him to wonder where the veil of reality parted when one entered a never-land so full of mind-concocted imagery; characters and life as this. It was a deep, deep sensation in his very center that whispered: *This is as it was.*

Sam felt the inner stirrings of childhood once more. The believer in whatever his mother said was a part of him now. She would never lie—not her. He whispered her name in sacred remembrance. *Gloria Robertson... This very event you taught me to believe deeply; right here*, he said to himself as he held one hand over his heart.

*"I do believe. I do, Mother. I do believe it, Mother..."* he repeated softly, over, and over again.

...

*And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.*

*And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?*

...

Sam fell to his knees. He had not felt such emotions in a very long time, did not understand really what had overcome him. The stranger brushed by him now. He seemed to stop, glance down at Sam. Sam immediately looked away, whether out of shame, fear—he wasn't sure—but he could not look the man in the face; could not see the stranger clearly if he tried. It wasn't the dimness of the room, but the overflowing moisture stinging his eyes.

He felt a mild voice call to him within. *"Samuel..."*

Was the man still there? Though he wished to, he could not lift his head; he could not face this man. Why was he crying like a child? What had overcome him? His heart was broken, and needed repair. All he wanted to do was go back home, tell Joy that he now believed.

*This man could do that for me, couldn't he?* He wept then reached out to touch the hem of

his robe. He felt the feather-like touch of an ethereal hand gently resting upon the crown of his head now... Then his name, "*Samuel*," was voiced to his innermost soul. "*Be ye whole.*"

"I know you," he whispered. "She believed," he cried unashamedly. "Mother did and...and..." he sobbed, collapsing upon the ground. Lost and out of control, he desired to bring the proper words to the surface.

"Joy...she tried to tell me, explain it to me. See, my mind would not let me believe until I could see. And, I... uh...", he finally said, but could not finish expressing his innermost thoughts, or get past the pent-up years of cynicism stored in a file of emotions stored deep within the mind.

His heart took over and felt the flame now. It wasn't a raging inferno, but rather like the warmth of peaceful embers from a fireplace in boyhood years past—and it seemed to gently melt away at the cold center of his chest.

With one hand over his heart, he reached down with the other to raise himself to his knees. The sensation washing over him swept from the bottom of his feet up into his very center, then to the very crown of his head and back to the floor like a warm light. He surged with energy, a tonic the doctors, with all their good intentions, could never prescribe. Like loving Joy, this was a euphoria unearned, undeserved. Like loving Joy, it filled him with inexplicable peace.

*"I'm free!"* he exclaimed giddily. *"I'm well!"*

Bowing his head in gratitude, he dared not believe the dream, dared not accept this healing of his soul, and his heart. Now, the blessed apparition was leaving him. Kneeling upon the hard floor of the inn, he reached out in hopes of touching the stranger as he passed by. The words escaped from deep within Sam, in gasps of childlike hope and grateful tears:

*"Oh Lord, my God!"*

## JOY

“Oh Lord, my God,” he cried. “Oh Lord, my God,” he tearfully pled, reaching up in supplication for forgiveness and understanding.

“Mr. Robertson,” the nurse’s gentle voice called to him as he clutched her hand. “Mr. Robertson!” she repeated, this time more insistently. “You are not supposed to be out of bed! Someone call the doctor on duty,” she shouted to the nursing station just outside the door of the room.

Sam was doubled over on the cold tile floor of New York City Hospital’s intensive care ward. It was late into the evening. He was still partially hooked up to the monitors, but not responding to the nurse’s pleas.

“Mr. Robertson? This is Nurse Beasley.” She knelt down next to him, tried to move him, but he wouldn’t let go of her hand.

“Oh, my!” a nurse gasped from the doorway. Several more came running, with Doctor Gray and the on-call physician close behind.

Uniting as a team, they helped lift Sam back into the bed. “Why is he crying? What’s happened here?” asked Doctor Gray.

The nurse, a bit rattled, tried to explain. “I came in and found Mr. Robertson on the floor. He was crying. He grabbed my hand and wouldn’t let go—he just kept praying. I have no idea why the rail was down or how he fell out...”

“Well, let’s take a look,” the on-call physician, Doctor Craig Dawson said as he leaned over Sam, then turned to the head nurse. “This man was near death last time I looked in on him, and now...” Nurse Beasley took a brief look at the chart and rushed off for the nursing station. Both Doctors Gray and Dawson now took to examining Sam from either side of the bed, when Joy appeared at the door.

“What’s going on?” Joy asked the nearest nurse, a nervous catch in her voice.

The nurse smiled and patted her on the arm. “He’d gotten himself out of bed and was having some sort of nightmare. Let’s give the doctors a few minutes, then they’ll catch you up on everything. Okay?” She turned Joy away and suggested they go to the ICU waiting room.

“I want to stay,” Joy insisted.

“Joy?” Sam called weakly. “Joy? Is that you?”

## THE MIRACLE

48 Hours Later

“Amazing, I must say, Joy!” Doctor Gray exclaimed as Joy visited with him in the nearby doctor’s office. He discussed the recent week and the healing progress that her husband, Sam Robertson was making.

Down the hall, Doctor Dawson shook his head and probed once more with his stethoscope. “Congratulations, Mr. Robertson. It’s remarkable; truly amazing. I don’t recall any recovery like it, especially of a man your age, the condition of your heart in full cardiac arrest... Well, they reserve the term ‘miracle’ for these occasions. Something, or someone besides this staff, pulled you through. We’d all like to take the credit, but, frankly, I wouldn’t have been surprised to see you with a bed sheet over your head at my next visit.”

Sam blew out a sigh. “It took prayers,” he said simply, his voice weak yet steady. He reached up to take the doctor’s outstretched hand. “No doubt about it, Doc. I’m really grateful to you; to all of you.”

“Well, I’ll check in on you this evening. At this rate, I’ll be seeing you on nightly television again, too.”

Minutes later, Joy reappeared at his bedside. Sam smiled and searched her eyes.

She stroked his hair and kissed his forehead. “I was worried I’d never see you again.”

“So, you were praying, huh?”

She slid a chair up to his bed and reached for his hands. “A lot of people were praying. Cards, letters, e-mails: too many to count, from people all over the country. Messages from friends have poured in, all the people in the business, they’ve been sending their well-wishes and prayers. People love you, Sam. I knew they did, but I had no idea how many you’d touched.”

“I haven’t touched anyone. Not really,” he replied quietly, earnestly. “I’m a different man. In here,” he said, patting his chest. “Remember that night at the restaurant? Right before...” He stopped. Glassy eyed, he tried to say what he was feeling, but found the words wouldn’t come.

“Oh, Sam,” she whispered. “I remember. I was so hard on you. I felt so bad. I thought... See, I felt you were missing out, and...” Joy, too, began to stumble over the myriad emotions

pouring out of her, unable to connect the hodgepodge of words to describe the way she felt about him.

Sam gently squeezed her hands. “It’s alright now. Everything is all right. I’ve been somewhere only this heart disease could have taken me. I have a lot to tell you. But I want you to know something.” He smiled, reached up to brush her silky auburn hair with his fingertips. He placed his hand on her arm, then over her heart. “Here. Right here. Now I understand, baby. I understand in a way I can’t totally describe. I understand what you were trying to say before. I know who sent you back, gave you life again when you were a scared little girl in Primary Children’s Hospital. I understand the words now. What they meant.”

She listened to the steady, rhythmic beating of his heart with her head placed gently upon his chest. “A big heart, Sam.”

“And, Joy, honey,” he softly whispered in return, “I’m finally *whole*.”



SAM ROBERTSON *LIVE*Upper West-Side Manhattan

“Sam, do you really think this is a good idea? Everyone will understand. Your producer said they already have the ‘best of’ *Sam Robertson Reports – The Christmas Shows* ready to play for next week. Why don’t you put this off. Give it one more week. Stay home...relax.”

Joy leaned past the door, fluttering her big “Bambi” eyes, and putting on the pout he adored. He saw through her playfulness to the genuine concern she attempted to mask. She was trying to dissuade him from going through with this. She had even taken his overcoat hostage, hiding it behind her back.

“Joy, I have a story to tell,” he said, gesturing for the coat. “It’s Christmas Eve. I’m a ‘miracle man,’ remember? Doctor Gray even wrote it on my chart. You wouldn’t want me to keep the gratitude I owe to all those who prayed for me locked up here with us over the holidays, would you?”

“Sam...you know I don’t. I just worry, that’s all.”

“You’ll be right there with me, right? What can go wrong?”

She frowned, then shook her head. “Here,” she said, holding out the coat. “But I’m keeping my eye on you.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.” He smiled, kissed her, and helped her on with her coat. “I love you. Let’s go tell the world.”

Their driver was waiting as they exited the building. “Mr. Robertson. I hope you don’t mind. Here’s a Christmas card and a package for you.” He waved an envelope and smiled. “People all day have been saying how glad they are that you’re back at it.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Sam replied. “Who’s it from? You can’t be too careful nowadays.” He bent towards the driver’s ear as Joy scooted across the backseat. “Could be a letter bomb,” he whispered.

Tony laughed off the comment, but brandished the envelope in a way that told Sam he wasn’t entirely convinced the note was harmless. “I’m sorry. Really, Mr. Robertson, I didn’t think.... Guess I should’a had security check it out,” he said, checking his mirrors. “The man, he was so nice. Big fella; looked Italian, ya’ know. He’s new with the company, I think. Said he’d

been a deliveryman for years. Said he was gonna' take my place this afternoon so I can hit my family's Christmas Eve party."

He looked around the busy sidewalk, hoping to see the man. "Hmm. Where'd he go? He was just here a minute ago; dropped off the package. Anyway," he said, pulling out into traffic, "you know us paisanos—we look out for each other."

Sam opened the envelope and took out the folded card inside. It read: "Welcome home, Samuel. See you at Farouk's after the show. Signed: An old friend."

*An old friend.* Sam's mind began to wander. *Probably one of my pals from the radio show days back in the '70s,* he thought. *Gave it to the stand-in driver who handed it over to Tony....*

Tony returned to his jargon-filled patter. "This other guy, he's gotta' take over for me. Probably'll be more careful with, you know, guarding you against letter bombs and everything." Tony grinned, then scratched his head and glanced out onto the throng of holiday shoppers crossing the intersection ahead. "Maybe he went for coffee," he mused, revisiting for yet a third time the new guy who'd be subbing for him that evening.

"Tony, the card says, 'See you at Farouk's after the show.' But there's no package here."

"Hey, no sweat then, Mr. 'R.' Maybe the guy kept it to give you tonight at Farouk's. Like I said, I hope you don't mind, but I got this party, family, and all, ya' know. And the new guy there in the office volunteered to bring you back from the studios. Course, if ya' want, I can call home and cancel, tell them to start the party without me."

Sam chuckled at the driver's sincerity, his considerate offer. It was the same sort of caring and kindness he'd received for the three weeks since his release from the hospital.

"No, Tony. You celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Enjoy your family. But, if you can, I'd be honored to know that you tuned in to my Christmas message tonight."

"Hey, you got it, Mr. Robertson. I'll just gather the family around the TV to hear your story. We'll make it part of the celebration—finding out how you came back from the dead and all."

Sam lifted an eyebrow. He slid a few inches closer to Joy and smiled over to her, thinking, *You sure got that one right, Tony. You surely did!*

SAM ROBERTSON *LIVE* CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

“It’s a miracle.... I don’t know what vitamins you’ve been taking, but for all practical purposes you’ve got the heart of a forty-year-old,” Sam said, recounting Doc Gray’s words as he mingled with his radio show crew at the party.

Platters filled with Christmas delicacies were strewn about the ribbon and tree ornament-trimmed table. “Then he said,” Sam continued, “I’ve never seen such a reversal in all my years of practice. And with that, Doc Gray walked out. That was weeks ago. I’ve got to tell you, though, it wasn’t any special vitamins or diet or anything like that.”

Sam and Joy had arrived two hours early to set out their Christmas gifts and greet the Cable TV staff and crew he’d worked with for so many years now. Each had expressed in turn their heartfelt words of support for Sam. And then it was his producer Mary Bentley’s turn.

“Sam Robertson, you leave me no choice,” she began, an odd seriousness in her words. “You’re fired!” Then, through a wide smile set beneath tear-stained cheeks, she threw her arms around him and exclaimed, “I’m going to miss you so much.”

He drew her close, gave a peck on the cheek and then looked her in the eye. “Mary? You can cry! I’m touched.”

“Oh, shut up,” she whimpered, giving him a light slap on the shoulder, “or I’ll find some way to keep you in your contract!” Then she handed him an envelope with her Christmas greeting. “I’ve decided this is it for me, too. I’m retiring!”

“No! Really? Joy, did you hear that?”

Joy was at his side. “Mary, is this for real?”

Mary wiped her face and took a few moments to regain her composure. “Sam’s life nearly ending, then his second chance,” she croaked in a voice barely above a whisper. “It got me to thinking how this place has been my life; my religion, too. Seven days a week, my mind’s always here. Now my kids are grown and I’ve got a couple of grandchildren I hardly ever see. I don’t need the money. Without Sam, there’s just not much point in me staying on.”

Sam pulled her close again. “Mary, I think you’ve made an excellent decision. You deserve it. And Frank, he deserves it, too. He’s a lucky guy. I’m going to call him right after the show and congratulate him for getting you back.”

“Right here, Sam. I owe you,” came a voice from behind Sam.

He spun around. “Frank, good to see you here. How’d you sneak in?”

“Just waited my turn. Quite a long reception line, you know,” he said smiling. They embraced like brothers.

“Don’t let her get away from you again, Frank. Make her happy to be home. Travel, enjoy the kids and grandkids. I can tell you, almost losing Joy, thinking I wasn’t going to make it—it all put things into perspective.”

“We thought a lot about it, and about you, Sam. The world isn’t going to be the same without your mug on TV each night. You can’t be replaced.”

“How sweet, Frank,” Joy offered.

“Sam Robertson Reports *Live*. I kinda’ like the sound of that,” Frank replied. “Well, we better get to the stage. Take care,” he said with a wave.

Sam turned to Joy. “Be there for me, baby. As long as I know you’re out there, I can get through this.”

“I’ll be sitting right off the side of camera #1. You can count on it. And then I’m taking you home for a Christmas Eve to remember.”

Sam took her in his arms, held her close and kissed her forehead. “You are God’s greatest gift to me.” He winked, as he turned to head off to the stage, feeling her fingers slip away from his. He made his way to his position behind the desk. The familiar city skyline backdrop, recognized by so many people worldwide, filled the TV monitor to his left.

He drew in a deep breath and pondered on his final, career-ending message, what he now considered to be the report of his career. He had wrestled with what he should call it—this, his final show—and had decided in his heart of hearts that it would be known simply, and with a name appropriate to his dreamscape experience weeks ago.

He hadn’t been able to explain to Joy what he might say. For that matter, he didn’t fully know himself what he was about to say. Maybe it was fear he was feeling. Or maybe it was simply too sacred a message to tell more than once. He wanted to do this right, thank his Maker for another chance, for a new heart, for the new found faith he had received, and for the blessing of being able to spend more time with his beloved wife...all gifts beyond price.

So, *this* was it. It would be something so out of character, as far as what the world knew him to be. He swallowed hard...took a sip of water...waited.

Straightening his tie and brushing a hand through his slightly graying head of hair, he looked on as Associate Producer Larry McGarr, fingers raised, counted down the last few seconds. Then, on cue, staring into camera #1, he began:

“Welcome to this Christmas Eve edition of *Sam Robertson Live Reports*. And you have no idea how happy it makes me to be able to say that! First, I want to extend to all you viewers my profound gratitude for your cards, letters, and prayers that sustained Joy and I through my most recent life-and-death ordeal.”

He turned on cue to camera #2.

“Back from the brink, I thank our sponsors, friends, associates, and supporters everywhere; you’ll never know how deeply I feel about my life on and off the air with you. We have shared thousands of good times, reports from all over the world, events that have shaken the history of nations.

“One month ago, when my head hit the pillow in an operating room, I came close to never again speaking to you. It was during that long night of slumber, under the spell of anesthetics in a hospital ward with a heart beating at a snail’s pace, that I found myself in the fight for my life.

“I desperately wanted to live, to have a second chance to be with my beautiful wife Joy; to feel her love and stay even one more year here with her—and with you, my friends. That night of nights has changed me. I can no longer sit at this desk and do *Sam Robertson Live Reports*. So this Christmas Eve is my final broadcast.

“And though I regret to say this will be my final report, I am confident that what I offer is the report of a lifetime.

“My report is one of a dying man’s search for faith and meaning as he attempted to hold on to life, and to the new love he had found.

“Consider this: If a reporter were to be given a last chance to interview someone before dying, who would it be, and what would he ask?

“This, a Christmas Eve Special is my parting Christmas gift to you. I dreamt a vivid dream during the long night when my body lay in the cold grip of mortal struggle. The dreamy story I report to you was one I could not have conjured up in my wildest fantasies.

“I wandered away from the hospital, sometime between surgery and awakening in my recovery room. I found myself in an incredible time and place. I must say incredible because nothing like it exists today in the world, and I have traveled the world over many times.

“Although otherworldly, I must say that those dreamland events, even now, seem as real as anything I ever experienced. This may sound crazy, but please indulge me. It’s a Christmas and Easter story rolled into one.

“I dreamt I was taken back in time. The day was the first day after Jesus of Nazareth was

nailed to the cross. The year was AD 33, and the place, Jerusalem. There was one named Cleopas, an innkeeper from a village called Emmaus, and a Roman Centurion known simply by him as *the Friend*. Together, they took me on a path I never would have chosen to wander.

“I made a promise in my sleeping state which I intend now to keep. The promise was to make a report of my visit with them; to make amends for a man troubled by a mistake that must now, this Christmas, be rectified.

I cannot live with myself unless I give an account of his story and what it now means to me. So...at this season of gift-giving, I share with you a treasure some two thousand years in the making. I call this final broadcast: *THE CHRIST REPORT!*”

## THE INNKEEPER'S GIFT

"Thank you," Joy said to the smiling, broad-shouldered man who held the door to the limousine. "You're driving for Tony tonight?"

"Yes," he answered simply, then asked, "Mr. Robertson is coming with us?"

"Oh, he asked me to have you pull around the back. He has some gifts from the studio he'd like to load into the trunk."

"Yes, ma'am." The driver carefully shut the rear curbside passenger door and walked around the front of the long sedan to the driver's side. "Beautiful day. Christmas Eve always is, though," he said pleasantly, positioning himself behind the wheel. "And a fine chariot," he noted, patting the limo's padded steering wheel.

"What?" Joy giggled at his choice of words. She was still rehearsing in her mind the story as told by Sam an hour earlier, pondering the details of his dream-like visit to an era of both darkness and light. "Odd you should call it that. You were really involved in Sam's storytelling, I take it."

The big man chuckled. "You might say. I have an affinity for happy endings too. Congratulations on yours," he said, glancing into his rearview mirror. "Shall we?"

"Ready."

Joy finally felt at peace. Sam had healed miraculously. He had been given a gift she knew was from God—whether others considered it miraculous or merely a fine Christmas tale. She actually knew it would have had to be something deeply moving to trigger in Sam such a radical change of heart. He was a thinker, after all, one not easily given to persuasion without hard evidence. Something happened during his coma-like state in that cardiac intensive care unit. Between death's door and new life, Sam knew something his heart now trusted, and his mind could simply tell it in story form.

"Here we are." The driver popped the trunk open and began to step out to help Sam load the packages.

"No need, my friend. Just stay put. We've got it," Sam called out. Several members of the crew, along with Mary and her husband, had helped transport the stack of gifts from Sam's studio down the back stairs to the curb.

While Sam loaded the trunk, Joy rolled her window down to say goodbye to Mary and give

her a final kiss on the cheek. Then Sam scooted into the seat beside her and waved farewell to his friends. “Home *friend*,” he said, smiling.

The driver’s and Sam’s eyes met; Sam peering into the rear-view mirror from his backseat, and strong smiling eyes of cobalt beaming back at him from the front seat.

For the briefest moment Sam’s eyes questioned the driver with the thought, *Do I know you?* Then he turned his attention to his beloved Joy.

“That was lovely, Sam,” said Joy, sighing and leaning back into the soft leather seat. “I was so taken—so touched. You could launch a second career in fiction-writing with that kind of material.”

“It wasn’t fiction, Joy.” Sam slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “To me, it actually happened. It was like I was really there. Strange, even sitting there in front the cameras, I could almost smell the stews and hearth-baked breads at the inn, feel the dust from the streets of Jerusalem on my skin, hear the sounds of travelers on the road. It was so, so very real!” He gazed out the window at the crowded streets, his mind wandering. “So real...” he whispered.

Joy peered intently into his eyes, now fixed straight ahead but misted over with memory, sensing that he had an experience and had undergone a transformation that only he could fully know and comprehend. But she, too, knew something about the power of such an experience. Her childhood illness and the kind man who had brought her back from the light...well, skeptics could believe what they wanted, but she knew better. *So, Sam came back from a light, as well*, she thought.

“Here we are,” the driver said with a smile. He was at the curb with the door open. Sam was still lost in quiet thought. Joy waited, knowing he was savoring a sacred memory.

“Oh!” he started, suddenly aware. “We’re home.”

Light snowflakes had begun falling, gilding the nearby tree limbs and walks with a crystalline sheen. Sam caught a brief glimpse of the driver before he reached back and pulled a hood over his head. “Welcome home, Samuel Robertson,” he said. “And a Merry Christmas to you and Joy,” he added as he turned to quietly resume his role at the driver’s seat.

The deep, penetrating baritone of the new driver awakened something in Sam. He got out of the car and stepped around to follow him to the driver’s side door to face the man head on. Sam’s mind began accessing thousands of mental files, searching snapshots of people, places, events. Nothing. The man’s features struck an immediate, potent chord of warmth, but... Before he reached the driver, Joy called out.

“Sam, honey,” Joy called from the limo’s open trunk, “the doorman’s here to help us



unload. Could you give us a hand?"

"Sure, sweetheart. Be right there," he answered, still trying to place the blue eyes and face of a man he had only just now met through the mirror, as he opened their door, and in the briefest of verbal exchanges. Fumbling for his wallet, and fishing out his last hundred-dollar bill, Sam approached the driver's door, opened it, and said, "And have a Merry..." he stopped with a questioning expression—the man had vanished. *Must be with Joy by the trunk...*

Turning, he saw Joy at their apartment's lobby door with an armload of gifts. "Hey, Joy," he called. "Where's the driver?"

"Last I saw he was wishing us a Merry Christmas," she shouted back. "Better hurry before you're caught in a blizzard," she added before disappearing inside.

*Must have headed across the street to the deli while I fumbled with my wallet,* he thought. "Be right there, Joy," he called as he hurriedly crossed the lightly traveled residential street and entered Farouk's, which was nearly set to close doors.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Sammy," greeted the Egyptian store owner from behind the meat counter. "I watched your show. Everybody is talking, Mr. Sammy," Farouk added. "I hardly remembered I was working. What a story, I tell you."

Farouk owned the only Middle Eastern/Greek-American/Italian deli Sam had ever heard of. It was the one place where a man with a yen for a falafel, a side of potato salad, a slice of greasy pizza with extra cheese, and an artery-clogging portion of baklava for dessert, could indulge himself.

"I'm looking for someone. A big man, the driver of my car. He disappeared and I thought maybe he came in here."

"Big like a football player, blue eyes like a German, dark like Italian, and a deep happy voice?" Farouk answered.

"Yeah, that's him."

"Sure. He came in and asked me to give you a package. Said you would understand. It's right here." He wiped his hands on his apron and hung it on a hook in the corner.

Sam felt a bit apprehensive. There was a gnawing sensation in his gut that was both pleasant and impatient—the way one feels while waiting for a loved one to arrive for a visit, or he supposed, how an expectant parent might feel just before the birth of a child. His mind continued to race, seeking to arrive at some resolution of where he'd met the man; the limo driver.

"Here we go, Mr. Sammy. And Merry Christmas," Farouk said, handing him the nondescript, solid, oblong package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Sam took it and angled it toward the light so as to more easily make out the handwriting:  
*To Samuel Robertson, in gratitude for The Christ Report.*

“Hum, well thanks again, and Merry Christmas, Farouk.”

“I will just close the door behind you,” he said, following Sam to the front. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Sammy.”

Sam stepped out into the fast-accumulating snow that crunched underfoot as he walked. He tucked the package under his arm, looked both ways, and jogged back across the street. There was a new vigor in his step, one he hadn’t known for years. It surged in him.

He was happy and feeling right about life. In fact, he never could have imagined a better ending, nor a more satisfying report on which to end his career than the one he’d delivered today, Christmas Eve.

## PEACE BE UNTO YOU

Reaching the lobby door, Sam glanced back at the empty car, certain the driver would show up soon, hoping to thank him properly and spread some holiday cheer; the tip kind.

He alternately whistled and hummed along with the holiday music that wafted from under his neighbor's doors as he made his way down the hall to the elevator.

A tune had stayed with him all that day, seemingly playing over and over in his mind. It was the country singer's rendition leading into his final *Sam Robertson Live Reports*.

*Humm...humm...humm... the angel sings, Christ is born today; that man might live for evermore, because of Christmas Day.*” He reached for his keys. *It should be illegal to be so happy,* he thought, opening the door.

“In here,” Joy called from the corner near the tree. Two mugs of hot cocoa sat on the end table next to the couch. “Let's sit by the fireplace and relax. Now, forever, it's just you and me. Life is good, Sam,” she said, smiling. “Come.” She patted the seat next to her.

He hung up his overcoat, then brought the package over, kicked off his shoes, fell onto the cushioned sofa, and propped his feet up on the hearth to let the glowing flames do their magic.

“What's that?” she asked, seeing the package.

“Don't know. I was looking for the driver, and went over to Farouk's to see if he'd gone there. Guess he had, because he left this for me. Strange fellow. Could have handed it to me himself.”

“Open it,” she urged. “Go on. Let's make it the first.”

“Oh...if you insist,” he said with a grin that no one would be able to wipe from his face this day. Every cell in his body vibrated with happiness, assuring him that life was not only good, but an extraordinary miracle. He slid his finger along one edge of the loose wrapping and tugged at the string that crisscrossed on the sides and tied into a bow on top. *Rather rustic packaging,* Sam mused.

He kept up his soft whistling, humming-singing combination, marveling at his good fortune; the blessing of having Joy next to him in this moment. It was the beginning of *their* time; an ongoing series of days and nights in which he would never have to be away from her again.

“Well?” she asked.

He paused as the rough paper was removed. His stare was locked on the parcel's contents;

his gaze suddenly miles from Joy, all in an instant.

“Sam, honey? Something wrong?”

His heart unexpectedly skipped a beat, then went into warp-speed. His hands trembled as he ran his fingers over the edge of the rectangular object sitting in his lap, still padded in lamb’s fleece and tied with leather cords, which loosened effortlessly as his fingers fumbled with the knots.

He gently drew the musty woolen fleece covering away to expose a carved wooden plank, one inch thick, about a foot in length and some eight inches wide.

*Scorch marks!*

His eyes watered. His mind was swimming against the current of the impossible. Momentarily paralyzed, lost in thought, he revisited the story in his mind, then leapt to his feet. *The writing! Engraved upon the wood! Those words!* He let the words play in his mind over and over again. His fingers shook as they caressed the inscribed Hebrew lettering.

*It can’t be!* he breathed with reverence. A piece of near-transparent onionskin paper had been tucked beneath the board, and now fell free, drifting to the floor.

“Sam, sweetheart! What is it?” Joy picked up the single-page note and handed it to her husband. Sam carefully held it up and read its deftly and elegantly penned message. He began to silently read a letter addressed simply to, *Reporter Samuel Antonius*:

*Greetings Samuel!*

*You were charged with a promise to make a report and accepted this charge with the faith of a child. For what you have done this day you will forever be known by title:*

*Samuel—Reporter for the King!*

*You have made the 'The Christ Report' a worldwide event and now Cleopas is finally at peace.*

*And our King? He wishes a sacred message for you—one He believes you learned while walking with us from Jerusalem to Emmaus.*

*Our King, unlike those of His day when he walked with us on the earth, is filled with grace, mercy, and love. He forever invites each of us to join Him with outstretched hands of one who knows pain, suffering, sorrow, and temptation; even more than any man could know.*

*To know Him one must simply seek Him. Behold the secret and the mystery to acquiring faith:*

*As it was on the road to Emmaus for the two despondent disciples, so may it be for everyone!*

*He invites all to embrace His truth. Sinner, saint, or skeptic—you were picked from time beyond that day on the road from Jerusalem to the Inn to address what 2,000 years failed to largely produce: men and women*

*of faithlessness turned to giants of faithfulness.*

*Samuel, who healed your broken heart?*

*Who mended your skeptical mind?*

*Who promised you the love you feel?*

*Who gave you the faith you possess?*

*The fire filling our souls, as happened to Cleopas and I on the way to Emmaus can happen for all who seek Him with a sincere and broken heart.*

*Do you recall the words our friend Luke wrote? Those words which Cleopas and I spoke to the Apostles, gathered in sorrow in the upper room after we ran back to Jerusalem to tell them of our risen Master?*

*We witnessed of The Christ's personal resurrected appearance to us thusly: "Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us by the way?" That is the real fire which creates a purified heart and a determined mind.*

*His appearance can be just as real to any mortal man or woman who accepts the offer He extends when one opens their broken heart to Him. For it was only after our contrite hearts—broken for sadness and for not rescuing the Christ from the cross—that He appeared, to break bread with*

*us at the Inn. This, that we might understand how to recognize Him ever after, He offers fire!*

*The world has waited long to discover this witness—as if it were a secret—for the world of men and women are so busy that they create the noise which deafens their ears. They gaze down at devices for answers instead of up to Him for all truth. They dismiss quiet meditations and prayer for audible stimulation at all hours of waking and slumber.*

*Hear these words, O world, from Samuel Robertson's own mouth, even "Fama Christus" as Pontius Pilate commissioned him write. Become the heart-broken disciples on the Road to Emmaus and He will appear to comfort your hearts! As your hearts burn with pleasant fire, He offers assurance that you are never alone!*

*There is more for you to do, Samuel. The message given to the world this day must be delivered over and over until humankind desires evil no*

*longer, but only the fire of Faith, Love, and Joy ever more!*

*Cleopas thanks you for keeping your pledge to him and he now keeps his to you. I have been entrusted with a token of respect from our mutual friend, the Innkeeper of Bethlehem and Emmaus. You will have found carefully wrapped in woollen cloth something special and kept from the world until this day.*

*Once crafted by a carpenter of Nazareth, this carved cedarwood tablet from Mt. Tabor was a reminder, hung atop the entrance of a humble inn destroyed by fire. This alone, survived the blaze of the first Inn of Bethlehem, and was kept safe near my home in Caesarea until this day. Let this token assure you that your visit was no night vision alone, but a journey to a time and place which really was, and through brother Luke's writing, still is.*

*A second sacred placard of cedar has been hidden up by me to come forth at a future time. As the first one freed an Innkeeper from his guilt at turning away the Christ child at Bethlehem, the second one shall free a Roman Centurion of his part at Golgotha. Your report was necessary before it could be revealed to the world; and so it shall be. . . soon!*



*Our savior's death was no simple fanciful tale, and His resurrection was sure and true! Of this second cedar plaque? It shall testify before the great day of His return that the one who died is alive and King to whom all knees shall bow, and tongues confess.*

*We shall meet again—and when we do these words of the Lord, as recorded by Apostle of the Lord, our brother Matthew, shall greet you:*

*“Well done thou good and faithful servant. . . Enter thou into the joy of our Lord!”*

*Shalom, Brother Samuel. May peace and Christ's love grace your house forevermore! In the service of our King, Lord, and God!*

*~ Friend Simon Cornelius*

...

“It was a dream!” Sam gasped as tears rained from his face.

“Samuel?” Joy pressed. She stood to steady him. “You’re trembling. Should I call a doctor?”

“No!” he blurted, barely able to speak. He gazed up at the ceiling, as if seeking an answer hidden there. He brushed at his eyes, thinking to stop the moisture bursting from them. A low moan emanated from his chest; a sob deep from within.

Joy, frightened, now stroked his arm. “Honey, please... Sit. Tell me what it is.”

He held up his hand to assure her that he was okay. Then he cradled the sacred object in both arms and reread the words from his dreamland friend.

He muttered certain lines over and over as if burned into his soul:

*Now you know He will hear you...*

*The world has waited long to know this, as if it were a secret...*

*Become the heart-broken disciples on the Road to Emmaus...*

*Hear these words, O world, from Samuel Robertson’s own report, even:*

*The Christ Report!*

*Is not this true?*

At last, Sam wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He made his way past the sliding glass door and out onto the balcony. The snow was falling heavier now; large, satin flakes gliding down from a translucent New York City sky. He leaned on the railing and scanned the quiet, abandoned streets below.

Sam’s gaze led him to a tall man in the plaza that fronted the mall on the opposite corner. Shrouded in a billowing robe-like overcoat, a hood obscured his features, except for a pair of steady eyes fixed on Sam.

*“It’s you!”*

Sam raised his arm, then placed his hand over his heart.

The tall man slowly brought his hand up in similar greeting, at a right angle in a salute of friendship, then right hand to the middle of his chest.

As he did so, Sam fully expected the apparition to disappear, as he had just an hour earlier. Yet, after returning Sam’s salutation, he reached up and removed the hood from his head to reveal himself; a sure witness indeed to what had transpired.

The large man smiled, nodded, and turned, before dissolving into the snowy whiteness that enveloped New York City on this Christmas Eve.

“Sam? Who was that?” Joy asked, sidled up from behind, with her arms wrapping around him and hands clasped over his chest.

“You saw him too?” Sam gasped.

“Yes, of course,” she softly replied. “Who was he?”

Sam could barely allow the word to escape from his tight vocals. *“Friend!”* he finally

breathed reverently.

He and Joy remained in each other's embrace for several long, wordless minutes. His eyes continued to sweep the street below, straining to see past the increasingly dense screen of falling flakes and moisture filling his sight. At last, Joy suggested they return to the warmth of the fire-lit cozy, and dry Penthouse. Sam finally relented and followed her inside.

Sam earlier had supposed that he was happy, and supremely so. But now he was that and more. He was, in a word, *whole*. An indescribable peace swept over him as he understood that some things simply don't have easy answers; that reality is what we may *feel* more than what we simply *see*.

Taking tools from the kitchen drawer, and a step ladder from the storage closet, he fastened the ancient wood placard above their entry door. Then he stepped back for Joy to see. "It should hang here forever," he said, finally finding his voice. "When we enter, when we depart, it will remind us..."

"Sam, what does it say? The language is not familiar. And why has it touched you so deeply?"

"There *was* an innkeeper in ancient Bethlehem, Joy. A carpenter from that day carved these words into a board that the innkeeper had hung above his door. He kept it there to remind him of their kinship." Sam paused and looked Joy in the eye, a profound sense of reverence in his gaze. "The inscription is taken from the Koheleth, the words of Ecclesiastes, also called the 'Preacher'..." His voice caught, and he bowed his head, unable to finish.

"Sam," whispered Joy, reaching up to brush the tears away. She pulled his face down to hers, stroking his quivering cheeks with hers; kissing away the wetness on them.

For another long moment, husband and wife held one another. Then Sam made the attempt to answer Joy's question. "Never doubt. Always believe," he voiced, simply. "Love me and remind me of this day forever," he ended.

She simply nodded as if he should continue.

Then he looked up at the plaque once again. "I took it as a dream! In it the innkeeper said he would give this to me if I did my report; if I revealed to the world the truth about his devotion to his Master."

He closed his watery eyes, squeezing one more salty droplet from each. He knew the words from his dream *by heart*. They had brought him back to his beloved. "If it had not been for them, for that place, for Him... I couldn't be..." he stopped and drank a deep breath of emotion-filled air into his lungs, "...I couldn't be here with you today," he said turning to her.

Joy didn't understand all of what he said but whispered, "I feel what you are saying. Right here," she softly said, patting her chest with both hands.

Sam nodded. *That's right, my love. That's right,* he thought to himself as he tenderly kissed her cheek and set his head against hers. His new faith had made him whole, complete, and gave him a new set of eyes; those discerning from his heart where all truth can appear without rationalization—a place where the mind of Christ is born, lives, and speaks. As if seeing the words on the plaque for the first time, there in the presence of Cleopas, at the dim but warmly lit inn of Emmaus, he now uttered them aloud. Each word. Slowly. Reverently:

*“Go thy way, eat, and drink with Joy, and drink thy wine with a merry Heart, for God now accepteth thy works. Live Joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest, for that is thy portion in this life...”*

## EPILOGUE

### 10 Years Later – Christmas Week

No one seemed aware of them. The happy couple held hands on the dais and gazed into the somber faces of those in the crowded Manhattan cathedral. He turned to her and smiled. She returned his happy gaze with satisfaction and peace.

It was less like a funeral for them, and more like a celebration. Some of the leading people of news, politics, entertainment, and of course ordinary people, came to pay their final respects to Samuel Robertson and his wife Joy.

They were tragically killed in a sudden auto-pedestrian accident while crossing Central Park West for a stroll through the famous “Strawberry Fields” of Central Park, to be followed by a carriage ride at the end of their walk.

Their passing stunned the world who had come to know them for Sam’s storytelling, but also the transforming good they had performed for charities all over the world in the past ten years. Life had been good, and Sam had miraculously beat the ticking clock of mortality for these ten Christmas Eve’s after it wound down to zero in a hospital one decade before.

Except for a “*Sam Robertson Live*” reading every year of his famous “The Christ Report” at both Easter and Christmas Eve—followed by a book signing of his novel by the same name—he and Joy spent their time in pursuits of charity, travel, and marveling at his second chance at life.

Now they were given a final gift; to observe what only the mind could conger in its most fanciful imaginings: the reward of friendship from so many, and the knowledge that love is not a transitory thing, but grows forever. In fact, Sam learned, as did Joy, that love in its many forms was the only thing that really mattered in living; and was the reason for mortal existence after all.

The first gift was the event of dream-like knowing that the Christ story was real, and of those ghostly characters from the pages of Holy Scripture coming to life and witnessing of it. The plaque above their entry door had become a central talking piece that friends and family who visited their penthouse apartment were not only drawn to, but converted to as well.

Sam’s childlike and earnest reveal of its appearance that Christmas Eve years before, caused more hearts to soften than he ever could have imagined possible. And in doing so, many gave up devices with less looking down in their lives, and more looking up than the telecom sales world appreciated.

Now, the scorched wooden plaque with Hebrew inscription, had been bequeathed to St. Peters Cathedral, and it rested on an easel before their caskets. As mourners passed by, each seemed to spontaneously reach out and touch the glass-encased treasure from an ancient land; a relic said to be over 2,000 years old.

Sometimes, Sam thought, it takes near death to really learn how to live.

Joy seemed to pick up on his thoughts adding, "...and to understand immortal life and love in the first place."

Sam squeezed her hand and smiled. "Shall we?" he asked.

Joy smiled and nodded in reply.

They passed by the crowds, enjoying the faces of friends and family lined to pay their final respects. Reaching the exit from the cathedral to the street, Sam and Joy Robertson noticed the carriage; a gloriously luminescent conveyance gilded in gold.

Two white stallions, hooked to it by harnesses of silver, pranced eagerly, waiting for their carriage guests. There, in the carriage seat was a driver; easily recognized by Sam, and now Joy as well.

"Where to Samuel and Joy?" the elegantly robed man at the reins joyfully asked.

He took Joy's hands in his, smiled, and reverently voiced in unison with his wife:

"Home... *Friend!*"

## AUTHOR’S AFTERWORD

### The Two Editions

This is a 2023 final version of *The Christ Report*. First conceived for a novel in the early 2,000s, and then printed by my private publishing company, PowerThink, LLC for representation to distributors at the “Book Expo LA” in 2008, some of those promotional copies known as “ARC’s—Advanced Reader Copies” were given out for free and have found their way to the internet on such sites as Amazon and eBay. I have never listed or sold any 2008 ARC printed editions except a few from my current website at gift-pricing; now no longer offered.

No monetary effort has ever been put forth in marketing, promotion, or distribution of any kind through stores online, in making that 2008 edition eBook available. I simply listed the 2008 eBook edition since then at Amazon for any of those who may stumble upon it. Few have. It has since been replaced with this First Edition as edited from the ARC copy.

This 2023 ARC has been highly edited, modified, copyrighted, and now includes a “Prologue and Epilogue” which the former ARC does not.

Sometimes novels are not published immediately after they are written. Two other novels, *When the Last Leaf Falls*, and *In a Place Called Love*, have been written over the years since first conceived in the 2000’s and 2010’s respectively, and now wait for the timing they deserve. I believe their time is coming soon. They will be, of course, fresh, never before seen First Editions.

I am not sure why I waited another 15 years to begin to offer, and make available the edited and revised *The Christ Report* to the public. I just followed instinct and my heart. Perhaps *He* knows what I did not back then; that the world might receive this story and its *secret* as described by our character Cornelius, at the best timing and not mine.

All I know is that world has never outgrown the Christmas and Easter stories and that *The Christ Report* is as fresh as the day I finished its first draft so many years ago. It is heartfelt, and an attempt at entertainment that offers a witness to sacred events billions of people worldwide accept as non-fiction.

Now with a new and fresh beginning and ending with a Prologue and Epilogue never before seen, along with revised and edited chapters through an eye sharpened to improvements over these intervening years, I believe this story may be embraced and shared worldwide for many years to come.

The characters Cleopas, Cornelius, the women, Apostles, Pilate, and others are taken from the dramatic accounts as found in the Holy Bible. They have worked in me for over twenty years since first conceiving the idea for this novel. I hope to meet the real characters in some future day as friends...for they have become *real* to me.

James Michael Pratt—2023



## THE MAKING OF THE CHRIST REPORT

James Michael Pratt

There would be no Easter if there were not first a Christmas, the story of the birth of the Redeemer, Jesus of Nazareth. THE CHRIST REPORT has entwined the spirit of both stories from participants we only come to know with a little digging. That journey of digging, for me at least, began in 1972 as a young man looking for Christ in Peru while in the service of others, finding him to my great satisfaction, and has continued with this novel five decades later.

The novel's title came to me in 1998 and the first draft was completed in 2004. As general Christian fiction, it focused upon the story and characters through a writer's signature approach to entertainment, and became my way to offer a personal witness for Jesus Christ.

Feeling inspired to create the story after four bestselling novels back in the late 1990s and early 2000's, I risked sharing this writing venture with my established literary agent and publisher of that time. They asked me to continue in the general inspiration and love genre writing I had won readers with them on. Understanding, I quietly moved forward on the story, knowing that its day would arrive, and assumed it was to be sooner rather than later.

I kept the storytelling close to the content of The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 24, combined with well-earned intuitions and my developed writing voice and style. The fictional license taken with the characters and their roles in the story is something that is meant to inspire, but of my own imagination.

A fan of the 1970's multi-million book selling author Og Mandino, I saw THE CHRIST REPORT first as a love story, then a soul-redemptive story, and finally a story of learning how to hear the voice of Christ. In the end, it became a faith promoting adventure to write with this aspiration; to affect as many lives as Mandino's multi-million selling hit, *The Christ Commission*.

Though discouraged by my first literary agent to stay away from strictly faith-based novels after four successive bestsellers in the inspiration and love story category, it sold after a bidding auction to publishers in New York through my well-established second agent in 2005. Never having identified any particular linked faith during my short career, I didn't realize my historical family religion would be any issue. The purchasing editor at Time Warner was excited about the worldwide potential for the title, but then determined that my address and bio, including living in Utah, wouldn't work for their Christian audience. It never occurred to me that institutional religious bias would be an issue since it never came up in my publishing experience to that date.

I can tell when timing isn't right, and took the hint when Time Warner and the other bidders took the same bias as a factor in walking away. I was even approached secretly by another bidding editor regarding the issue, without her identity offered. Warning me of the agent's anger with publishers at the bias shown, I was both flattered by her outreach and a bit befuddled. My career was taking a hit because of my agent's anger, she told me, but also asked that I please let her know who purchased the film rights and book rights when that time came. Needing to let the situation cool, but confident that the initial major publishing interest testified of the novel's potential reach, I sadly let it sit for 4 more years.

Giving it that rest before publishing it under my own private publishing company, I created a version for *Advanced Reader Copies* (ARCs) designed for major publishing, libraries, and distributors familiar with my already successful novels: *The Last Valentine*, *The Lighthouse Keeper*, *Ticket Home*, *Paradise Bay*. I gave out just over 1,000 complimentary copies at 'Book Expo LA' in 2008. Some of those autographed ARC copies can still be found online for sale today for as much as \$72.00.

Not seeing the interest then, I finally listed the eBook version on Amazon in 2012 to secure my title's publication name and intent to *one future day* break it out in a mainstream way. I never spent time or money to promote it since then. I simply wanted my intention announced. Now, in 2023, it is time.

Self-publishing has matured. Bias has diminished. Fans are kind. My author brand has grown over the years in spite of a tactical retreat for some health and family issues needing attention. With the worldwide success in Hallmark Hall of Fame's 2011's launch of *The Lost Valentine*, film success has been catalogued. 14.5 million world premier viewers, and many millions more since then have made my brand one being sought after by the sensitive story lovers at heart. The movie has been re-played monthly on multiple channels for the past 12 years. Now it is time to blend that branding of my name and *The Lost Valentine* movie fame with my witness for Christ; THE CHRIST REPORT. With this major revised First Run edition, you have become among the original readers of the world to read it.

## A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON FAITH

I have always loved the scriptural faith of a Centurion of whom Jesus declared through Luke, Chapter 7, verses 1-10 (KJV): “*I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.*” And so, this story has much to do with that mystery man, the Roman Centurion, who the Messiah so honored. But also, it honors another disciple, who I have imagined as the repentant original innkeeper who had turned the babe Jesus away at the Bethlehem Inn years before. Faith is a beautiful thing, made only sweeter by redemption.

The rarely recounted event that inspired the story took place just outside the walls of Jerusalem on the Road to Emmaus. As mentioned in the novel itself, the story is found in Luke, Chapter 24, of the New Testament, which tells of the two sorrow-filled disciples returning from the anxiety-filled nights and a day following the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

There, along the road, appeared to them a stranger who taught them from scripture of all the events that must transpire, including the death and resurrection of the Lord. Then he broke bread with them after they arrived at the Inn where their eyes were opened. So it was—as imagined in THE CHRIST REPORT—that Jesus began his mortal ministry as a babe at an Inn’s stable near the Holy City, and then 33 years later reveals his immortal ministry’s beginning at another Inn outside of Jerusalem. That element of our story is a seldom heralded fact until now—though reported by St. Luke’s Gospel 2000 years ago.

After he disappeared from the two disciples, named Simon and Cleopas, they understood who the stranger was who had opened the scriptures to the eyes of their understanding: *And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?* (St. Luke 24:32) This is the great secret of THE CHRIST REPORT: Our eyes aren’t needed to know that the Christ is real, but the *heart* is.

And perhaps that is why a Roman Centurion was visited by an angel and told to find Simon Peter, as found in the Book of Acts Chapter 10. He was already a proven man of faith by then. The Centurion would become the first Gentile to be baptized into the small Jewish church, opening the Gospel to all; and not those of Israel alone.

Imagine that: a uniformed “enemy” of Israel was the first to join the faith outside of Israelite blood! I encourage you to read the Gospel of Luke, and especially Chapters, 7 and 24 which helped frame this fictional account, THE CHRIST REPORT. Then read Acts, Chapter 10.

I have exclusively used the most widely read and time-honored version for research; the 500-year-old King James Version. I have taken great pains to simply be true to the purity found in

this classical version of the Bible text, yet wondering what “might have been,” as between the lines we read what was reported by Luke in his Gospel of the two men walking in sorrow on the Road to Emmaus, then joined by a third, the resurrected Jesus, as described.

Liberties for purposes of storytelling are of my own making in an effort to add to the world’s great body of faith-promoting fiction literature regarding the inspiring accounts of one Holy Birth, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Him who I honor as the Christ, Lord, and Redeemer of mankind; *Jesus of Nazareth*.

There are some things a man or woman comes to know. In a way, this is my “Christ Report,” after having sought his face and approval for just over 50 years.

Though this is clearly a Christian read, I have sought to make it a love story first. There are many “Sam Robertsons” in the world, among journalists, and at large. My novels, including the *Hallmark Hall of Fame* book-to-film movie *The Lost Valentine*, are all wrapped in the mystery of this thing we call *love*, yet set in historic climates of tragedy and sorrow at the same time.

Because of this most reassuring and cherished of human emotions, we may call THE CHRIST REPORT a story of *love*, faith, and redemption.

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I hope you may enjoy the free reading offered to members of the online *James Michael Pratt Book Club* with the slogan of, “*Once Upon a Time...*” You may sign up to receive frequent “Free Reads” and “Sneak Peeks” of works in progress by leaving your email address at this website link: [www.jamesmichaelpratt.com](http://www.jamesmichaelpratt.com). Through the book club, I hope to keep in touch with you as I continue to build the stories of love and faith you enjoy. Finally, as Cornelius offered to Sam, I wish for the reader: *To know Him one must simply seek Him. Behold the secret and the mystery to acquiring faith: As it was on the road to Emmaus for two despondent disciples, so may it be for everyone!*

James Michael Pratt—2023

Books

by

*New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author*

JAMES MICHAEL PRATT

THE LAST VALENTINE – A *Hallmark Hall of Fame* movie “The Lost Valentine”

THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

TICKET HOME

PARADISE BAY

THE GOOD HEART

DAD, The Man Who Lied to Save the Planet

MOM, The Woman Who Made Oatmeal Stick to My Ribs

AS A MAN THINKETH...In His Heart

THE CHRIST REPORT

COMING

WHEN THE LAST LEAF FALLS

IN A PLACE CALLED LOVE

THE FACE OF CHRIST

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