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*Somewhere near Aksum, Ethiopia*

He knew they were being followed, but the trailing van stayed back far enough so as not to be seen. Steven had expected somebody to be watching, somebody was always watching the church. Now he had to lose them or forfeit one of the world’s greatest treasures. His team had just loaded the Ark of the Covenant, *the* Ark, from under- neath the old church where it had been stored for such a time as this. Steven knew the church had been scanned and X-rayed throughout the years, with a mock-up of the Ark standing there, but most people believed the real Ark was not contained in the old church in Aksum, Ethiopia. What they didn’t know is that the real Ark had been safely hidden under the church floor, and had, through the years, been protected by the faithful priests who had passed down the secret for generations.

Steven had loaded the Ark into the old delivery truck that night, with the intent to deliver it to a small airport north of the city, where it would be transported to Naples for the great reveal. Now they were running, making turns where they could, trying to lose the tail they were convinced was a Cleansing Group hit team. The Cleansing Group was a loosely connected consortium of religious, nonreligious, and political groups who were committed to wiping out the relatives of those healed by Jesus. They were driven by fear, hatred, and power, with the singular purpose to eliminate any person claiming to be related to someone who had been healed by Jesus of Nazareth. It was discovered that people healed by Jesus possessed a residual effect from the healing, resulting in supernatural gifts and powers that were passed down through the centuries to their relatives. When DNA

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testing came into practice, it was discovered that there was a specific DNA marker that identified a relative who had descended from a Jesus healed person.

Many of the relatives of a Jesus healed person became Christ followers and used their gifts to serve the growing movement that became the Christian faith. The Cleansing Group came about as cer- tain religious and political groups looked at “Jesus healed people” as threats to their power and control. The first cleansing happened in Jerusalem, around five years after the death and mysterious dis- appearance of the body of Jesus Christ from Nazareth. The Roman officers were handed a list of those thrown out of the temples for claiming to be healed followers of Jesus, the carpenter who, for three short years, changed the world with his message of love, forgiveness, holiness, and community. Jesus was seen as a threat to the religious powers of the time. They had falsely accused him and had the Roman guard crucify him on Passover Friday. Their hope was that by killing Jesus on this holy day they would disperse the crowds as they had with other cult leaders in the past. The religious leaders were always dealing with the latest rendition of rebel leaders. Every so often, a man would rise to power claiming to be a messenger of God and lead the naive crowds for a while. When that man’s influence grew too influential or dangerous, the religious leaders would bring them up on fake charges, imprison or kill them and watch as the crowds dispersed and went back to their hopeless, meaningless lives.

This time, it was different. This humble yet powerful carpenter turned teacher wasn’t leading a rebellious political rabble but teaching the people about God’s love. His message was one of hope, forgiveness, connection, and holiness attained by a relationship with God, not by religious performance monetary gifts. After his death, Jesus’s body disappeared, his disciples claiming he had risen from the dead and returned to God. The temple leaders scoured the countryside, looking for evidence of some place where the body might have been hidden. They paid money to the temple guard who were guarding the tomb when it was opened, having them report that the disciples had taken the body. The body was never found, and the movement grew exponentially as a huge number of Jews converted

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to the new faith in the city of Jerusalem during the celebration of the day of Pentecost. Thousands were converted that day as they listened to the message about Jesus given by ordinary men speaking in each visitor’s own home language from their country far away. They took this conversion experience to their hometowns when they returned from Jerusalem. This was the beginning of the spread of the Christian faith.

When the first persecution of the Christians began, the origi- nal apostles and groups of believers moved out into the countryside, proclaiming the teachings of Jesus, doing miracles that could only be done by someone with supernatural abilities. Many were healed, and many more were converted. The Jewish leaders convinced the Roman ruling class that this movement would become a rebellion against Rome, moving the Roman leaders to come down with swift and deadly force. Jesus followers ran for their lives, and the move- ment spread throughout every town and city. Soon the message went to non-Jewish people as well, making the *Way*, as it was first called, the most culturally impacting event of the first century. Jesus had healed thousands of people during his earthly ministry, and many had been identified and shunned by the area synagogues and the temple at Jerusalem. Many of the healed possessed gifts and strengths they had not possessed before the touch of the master’s hand. The gifts they possessed were looked at by some as the blessing of God, and by others as the workings of Satan. The non-Jews who were healed went back to their hometowns to share their story, which prepared people to hear the good news that would come to them through the traveling disciples of Jesus.

This first attempt at cleansing the earth of the Jesus-healed peoples actually resulted in the spread of the Jesus message more than if they had simply ignored them and let them slip back into their mundane lives. The religious leaders of the time never understood that true conversions thrived under attack and persecution. Because of this attempted genocide, many believers were scattered to hundreds of small towns as they fled for their lives. These towns were blessed by these new believers in Jesus who took up residence and gave them- selves to service and love, as Jesus had instructed them.

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The second cleansing came in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and killed many of the families of people healed by Jesus. Even though it had been close to forty years since Jesus’s death, the synagogues had kept good records of the families that first acknowledged the healing touch of Jesus. Their names had been recorded by the local synagogues and given to the Romans, who were convinced by the religious leaders that these people and their families were a threat to Roman rule. This led to a purging of non-Jewish cities as well. People began to turn in family members in order to survive the merciless attacks. Survivors went into hiding, living their lives out in obscurity and obedience to their new Lord and savior Jesus Christ. As the years passed, relatives from the linage of a healed person began to show signs of special gifts or talents. Somehow, the healing touch of God had altered the healed person’s DNA, allowing for special gifts and powers not understood or accepted by the larger communities. Some were accused of witchcraft or demon-conjuring. Others were tortured to reveal what dark power they got their talents from. The remaining families pledged to stick together where they could and support the other families affected by the healing experience. They called their group the Sect of the Healed, or the SOTH.

Steven was one of the SOTH. He could trace his family lineage back to a man who had encountered Jesus outside a small city near Jerusalem. Jesus chose to touch the man for his healing, spreading mud on his eyes and spending time with him in order to see his eyes were completely healed. Steven and his brother both had the ability to not just see better, but to be able to retain everything they saw, in great detail, even mentally zooming in on things from half a mile away as if they were right in front of them. It was as if their eyes stored everything on a hard drive in their brain, and they were able to look at any object in amazing detail. Steven could see the van behind him, even if it was far back and around two turns. He focused his sight and could see in his mind the seven men with their weapons, one with a short-range, handheld missile. Now it was getting real.

Steven was out of options, as he saw the night-lights of the small airport up ahead. He pulled over, said a short prayer, and prepared the road. He had collected some ammunition and small claymore

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mines in the event that he needed to slow down a pursuit just like this. The mines would damage the van, leaving the people in the van stunned but alive. He played out the trip wires and placed the mines in the muddy ruts where the tires would be. He started off again and heard the sound of the first mine going off as he swung off the main road into the airport, sliding to a stop at a large, twin prop private plane bound for Naples with pallets of “olives.” Steven knew the Ark would make it; God had revealed this to him as he planned the escape. Three men came around the back of the van and wrestled the large wooden crate into the back of the small cargo plane. Now the Ark was in the belly of the plane, waiting to be delivered to the SOTH team in Naples, Italy. The world would soon be awakened to this and many more precious artifacts point to the reality of God and his love for mankind.

*Underground SOTH facility, Naples, Italy*

It was three weeks before the great reveal. Professor Linden Batchelor, Lindey to his friends, had been secretly working around the clock with key archaeologists and historians from around the world, some being SOTH relatives who had been identified and recruited by the SOTH leaders. Lindey had been connected to the SOTH when he was lured over to Arqa, Lebanon, to research a lead on a group of people healed by Jesus. They were called the Sect of the Healed, or the SOTH. Lindey was a professor of American history, with an emphasis on religious and political history from the founding of the nation through the twentieth century. God had led Lindey to the SOTH leadership in Naples, Italy, where he encountered the SOTH leaders and the amazing archaeological and historical finds that were before him. He was still pinching himself as he watched the artifacts and relics roll in from all over the world. There were so many times the world could have benefited from this kind of historic revelation, and he wondered why they had waited until now to share this with the world. Lindey had realized that God’s timetable had rarely lined up with his own, but he had learned that it was better to be in sync with God than living life on your own. He welcomed the new guests and led them to the rooms filled with precious historic artifacts. This group of world-renowned talent had volunteered their time after being recruited by Edgar Collingsworth, one of the SOTH members assigned to the great reveal. Edgar had worked for a DNA collection service and had hacked all of the DNA registration sites in the world. His software assessed millions of DNA strands, looking for a specific anomaly that would identify a person as a relative of a person healed by Jesus.

Once identified, Edgar would attempt to contact the person through secure channels and invite them to become part of the great reveal. Through the years, the SOTH leaders had been given many artifacts and written history that, if shared with the world, could launch another great revival of the Christian faith. Edgar had dis- covered that several thousand relatives had survived, living their lives in secret, and serving their Lord as best they could. The great reveal was a planned event that the SOTH would use to introduce some of the most compelling artifacts and relics known to man. The SOTH families had been protecting these precious gifts for the time when God would use them to call the world to know him one more time. The collection had been ongoing for many months, with some of the larger pieces being delivered this week.

Sarah Johannson, the SOTH leader, had brought the best and brightest SOTH members to the underground facility near Naples, Italy. The space had been created in the early 1900s and had been improved upon for decades. It was battle hardened, with the ability to withstand a limited nuclear assault. The technology was top-notch, and Edgar was in charge of every screen and computer. His residual talent passed down from his SOTH relative had left him with the ability to do amazing things with his mind, as well as possessing abilities for computer programing that made Bill Gates look like a junior high drop out. He was finishing the final software update for his trojan horse called “Awareness.” This powerful program would be loaded into every phone, tablet, laptop, and mainframe that was online. Every time a person used his device, the software spread to the next device, and on and on it would travel, as each person connected it with somebody else. “Awareness” would lie dormant until activated by Edgar. Once activated, it would allow the SOTH to show the artifacts and relics to the entire plugged-in world, giving proof of God on every screen that would be watching. No screen could be turned off once the software was activated. Everyone would hear the same message in their language, no matter where they were.

Lindey was meeting two new art historians today. One was Filleppe Jordan, an Italian professor respected in the antiquities culture as an expert in identifying written artifacts and books. The other was Emma Watson, an English woman with a PhD in early Judeo- Christian archaeology. She was recognized as one of the experts in her field, which was identifying and organizing old documents from the early times of the Jewish nation until the birth of Christianity. Both were SOTH family relatives, and both had been using their gifts to excel in their fields. They knew the day would come when they could use their world-renowned expertise as leverage to convince the world of the legitimacy of the Christian faith, and the reality of the person of Jesus Christ. Emma stepped forward, shook Lindey’s hand and embraced him in the traditional greeting of a kiss on each cheek.

She whispered in his ear with each kiss, “It is not safe, they know where you are.” Lindey was rendered speechless, but Emma kept her pace and moved into the first room to see the first set of artifacts she would need to verify to the world.

Lindey wandered over to the large screen where Edgar was working. “Edgar, can you do a sweep of the area to see if we have any guests we don’t know about?”

Edgar replied, “Sure, Lindey, but we are doing that every thirty minutes already. Akifah has two defense teams assigned to the roads and tunnels with orders to report any movements. Thanks for the extra encouragement, but I think we are okay for now.”

Hearing that made Lindey a little more relaxed, but he would follow up with Emma as soon as they had a chance to talk alone.

Lindey watched as Emma and Filleppe walked into the first room. They stopped dead in their tracks, and each drew in a long breath. It looked like a small museum with tables full of artifacts, tablets, papyrus scrolls, and files, hundreds of files. These were the collections of hundreds of SOTH families, precious heirlooms protected and passed down through the years. Each artifact needed to be labeled, studied, and verified as original in order to make the reveal as impactful as possible. Edgar had estimated that they would have ten to fifteen minutes of uninterrupted airtime to share with the world their treasure trove of precious artifacts and writings. After that, the major communication systems would shut down until they could rid the network of the bug. Edgar had already endured sev- eral attempts to identify the Awareness software by interested coders who had found the software embedded but dormant, looking like a software glitch, not a software hack. Once it was activated, it would self-destruct after the reveal, having only bits and pieces of data to study. Edgar thwarted each attempt with a swiftness that seemed as if he knew their next move before they made it.

Emma came to the first table where a small pile of nails was laid. Three were identical in size and thickness, with the fourth one smaller and thinner. “Those were the nails that held his hands and feet,” Lindey said as he came alongside her. “They were purchased by Joseph of Arimathea, the man who donated his tomb to bury Jesus. They, along with the cross post, were purchased to be held as precious memories of the savior’s great love. The Roman guard thought it odd that somebody would pay so much for common cross nails and an old cross post, but he took the old man’s money just the same.”

She looked again and said, “There is a smaller, fourth nail here, what does it mean?”

Lindey smiled. “It’s the nail that held the sign the Romans put above his head. It read, ‘Here is Jesus, king of the Jews.’ The Romans meant it as a mockery, but it was the proclamation that would change the world.”

Emma gasped, “I think I see blood, is that blood on the nails?”

“Yes, Emma, it is blood. The blood of Christ spilled for all men and women.”

“Has it been tested?” Emma said as she stared at the nails.

“Yes,” Lindey said. “We just got the nails yesterday, so we are running the DNA at this moment. There was also a small piece of bone attached to one of the nails. We think it may be a piece of bone attached to the nail when it was driven into the ankle. We also have some DNA from the cross post.”

Emma gasped. “The cross post, you mean the post that held Jesus at the crucifixion?”

“The very same,” Lindey said and smiled as he watched the little girl in wonder look on Emma’s face.

“Where...how...when...oh, I don’t know what to ask first,” she cried. Filleppe gasped as he came alongside Lindey and Emma.

Lindey explained, “Many families of the people healed by Jesus became close followers of the apostles, living with them and using their newfound gifts to help the apostles in their ministries. The apostles entrusted the SOTH with these and many other artifacts of the faith. They wanted the precious proofs of the faith to be pro- tected and passed down in secret until God reveled the time to share them with the world. I would imagine there were many times down through the centuries where the SOTH people thought would be the perfect time for the world to see these archaeological proofs, but it was never the best time. The amount of worldwide digital connect- edness experienced today would be beyond their imagination, and the ability to communicate large amounts of information to billions of people at once makes it the perfect time in history to share with the world the realities of our faith. Come, let me show you more.”

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Stationed outside the SOTH facility, Akifah leaned into the large binoculars, staring to see any movement from miles away. She knew to expect some kind of offensive but wasn’t sure if it would be stealthy or full-on attack mode. Akifah was a recent convert to Jesus, having served the Cleansing Group for close to ten years as a vengeful assassin and spy. She had been assigned as an interpreter for Lindey when he travelled to Arqa, Lebanon, having been lured there by Akifah, acting as an anonymous SOTH supporter. She had planned on eliminating the SOTH leaders when she got close to them, but the time she spent with these true believers had opened her heart to a relationship with God that was personal, intense, and relevant. She had learned that the story regarding her family and SOTH relatives had been a lie designed to create the hate and anger that fueled her misplaced loathing for the SOTH. God had come to her in a dream, showering her with his love and forgiveness, which led her to renounce her Muslim faith and embrace the love of God found through His son Jesus. Now, as a new convert, she was using her old talents to protect the SOTH until the great reveal happened. She put down the night vision binoculars and turned to the laptop with the drone feeds.

Using multiple drones hooked up to a single control screen gave her eyes in the sky in all directions. The drones had heat-sensitive cameras as well as radio pulse sensors, which could locate any use of electronics to within twenty feet. One of the drones had picked up multiple heat signatures moving in the undergrowth ten miles away. They did not look like they were moving with purpose; rather, they seemed to be moving in a grid pattern, searching for something they could use as a reference point in order to launch a larger attack. This was the recon team, and there would likely be more coming in from other angles. She redirected the drones and found two other teams making their way toward the road that led to the old mine. They were days away from contact, but getting closer. She radioed in the report and waited for a response.

“So you count three different teams, all who look to be moving toward the road to the old mine,” Sarah said as Edgar turned around in his wheelchair.

“Yes,” he said.

“They don’t seem to know where we are for now, but they are searching methodically and will find us eventually. One group seems to be farther away than the other two, who seem to be working together.”

Sarah said, “It’s too early for us to launch the reveal. We aren’t ready yet. Edgar, what are our options?”

“Well, we could lure them in, capture them, and keep them until the reveal is over, but that would cause a larger response team to come looking for them. We could capture them, and have you and I spend some time with them in order to give them a different story to tell their handlers.” Edgar was referring to their mutual gifts of affecting the mental state of people they were near. “It will take some time and effort, but I think we can make it happen. We must have another six days to finish the verification process and complete the collection of all the major artifacts we need for the reveal.”

Sarah said, “Let Akifah know to welcome our guests with stun guns once they get close enough. Bring them to our outer facility where you and I will, as you say, Edgar, spend some time with them.”

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Back in the underground facility, Emma was astonished at the relics, written materials, and files that depicted what life was like during the first days of the Jesus movement. She carefully examined each one, using forensic and archaeological testing protocol to properly categorize and establish each one as authentic and original. She settled into a chair at a table full of old scrolls and ancient papers. One document was the personal journal of Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, and the one who presided over the mock trial of Jesus the carpenter. The journal was opened to an entry over several days, beginning with a section that spoke about how his wife had come to him with a grave warning:

“My wife has warned me to watch out for a man coming to me for judgment who is innocent. She warned me to have nothing to do with him, and to definitely not make a judgment over him. She made me swear to let him go. I was troubled by this, as Athenia never tells me her dreams or makes requests of me that are this ridiculous. The Jews are an angry mob, but Roman steel keeps them in check. I have heard about one of their own rising up to lead the masses. Some of my soldiers have told me that this man heals the sick, raises the dead, and proclaims the kingdom of God to the masses. Even they are moved by his words, and I hear that many of them have secretly begun to follow him. Can it be that the gods are visiting us? Impossible, there is no God but Caesar, and mere man cannot attain a God’s power or position. I have ordered my men to keep a close eye on this man and report any activity that looks like it could lead to a rebellion.”

Emma was captivated by reading this for the first time. The journal went on to mention the day-to-day work of a prefect, until three days later when Jesus was brought before him.

“I may have met the man Athenia warned me about. His name is Jesus, he is a carpenter from Bethlehem, and a leader of the people. The Jewish leaders tell me he is a dangerous man who will lead the masses into rebellion if left to live. They actually want me to kill this man over some silly religious point. I have heard accusations against him, but I have not seen any real proof to back up the claims of these so-called witnesses. I called Jesus into my chambers so I could examine him apart from the murderous cries of the Jewish leaders.”

Emma called Lindey over, her face flushed with excitement. “Is this really the journal of Pontius Pilate? How did your people get this?”

Lindey sailed, “I hope you’re ready for all that you are going to see in the next few days, Emma. I recruited you here because you will be able to verify the authenticity of the scrolls and journals we have collected from SOTH families. This journal was taken from the house of Pontius Pilate after he committed suicide. He was an awful leader, corrupt and ruthless. He ruled with cruelty and deception, leading to his removal and exile into obscurity. He was sentenced to die but chose to take his life instead. One of his servants was a man whom Jesus had healed. He stayed with Pontius Pilate all those years, witnessing to his servants and even sharing the Jesus story with Pilate’s wife and children. His name was Stephen, and he was there the day Pilate killed himself. He helped Athenia and the children escape, as it was the custom of Rome to kill all the family of a Roman who committed suicide in disgrace. Athenia gave him the last journal of Pontius Pilate, describing his final years, including the moment Jesus was brought to him. I’m hoping you can verify this document as coming from the time and place it was written.”

Emma sighed. “I will begin today, but I hope I have time to do a good job. There is so much to do, and so little time left until the great reveal happens.”

Lindey smiled. “I have faith in you, Emma, God will give you the strength you need and the tools you’ll use to make it happen in time.”

Emma returned to the journal of Pontius Pilate, now eager to read the rest of the writings about Jesus’s trial. She skipped ahead to the part where Pontius Pilate brought Jesus to his chamber to inter- view him:

“These Jews will drive me to madness! Now they threaten a riot if I don’t do something about this Jesus. I brought this man to my private chamber to examine his claims and hear him out. When he arrived, he was badly beaten by the guards of King Herod. I had him cleaned up and gave him some water to clear his throat. He doesn’t look like a threat at all; in fact, he looks rather meek and unimportant. I could hear the crowds outside, whipped into a frenzy by the priests. I said to this man, “They say you are the king of the Jews. Well, are you?” He responded by asking me if it was my idea or one spoken by the priests. Imagine a lowly carpenter speaking to me like that! He went on to speak about his kingdom not being here on earth, as if there is any other place a kingdom could be! He would not answer any of my questions. He just stood there, looking at me with those eyes, those penetrating, haunting eyes. I told him that I had the power of life and death in my hands, and he responded by telling me that his life was in the hands of his father, not mine.

I could hear the crowds getting louder, but I did not want to lose face with the priests. I brought him out to the crowd along with another prisoner, Barabbas, who was also arrested for causing a riot. I believed the average person in the crowd would never want this murderer released, so I gave them a choice. They chose Barabbas! Now I must go against my wife’s counsel and turn this man over to be crucified. I will do it on their Passover day so that they will have to watch him die on one of their precious religious days. I have also ordered that a sign be placed above his head on the cross. It should read, “Here is Jesus, the king of the Jews.” That will enrage the self-righteous priests, but so be it.

When will I be freed from this dessert exile? I need to be back with my people in my beautiful city with men of power and influence. I will squash this uprising, then I will squash the priests for their insolence...”

Emma stopped, wiped a tear away, and started praising her savior for his love and sacrifice. It was all she could do...