

THE LAST APOSTLE



DENNIS BROOKE

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Chapter One

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them.... When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

JOHN 21:20-23



JOHN AMATO WATCHED the man with salt and pepper hair run his hand through the long blonde tresses of the woman at his side. The man seemed much more interested in his companion than in listening to the lecture on *The Fate of the Apostles* by Professor Wes Cavanaugh. From his seat directly behind the pair John noted the weathered gold band on the man's ring finger and the gray accents in her locks. He watched them lean their

heads into each other and share some whispered secret. The sense of longing in him flared.

At the front of the auditorium Cavanaugh cleared his throat. “Now, I’d like to pose a provocative question.” John turned his attention to the professor. The couple did the same.

“Imagine that the last apostle to die—didn’t.” John dropped the heavy pen he had been twirling idly in his fingers. It clattered across the floor and rolled against the seat in front of him. He raised one eyebrow as the professor picked up the bottle of Perrier sitting on the table to his left and took a languid sip, seemingly calculated to let the audience ponder his incendiary statement.

Cavanaugh let his statement linger over the suddenly silent auditorium. “What if the only apostle reported to have expired of natural causes is actually living among us today?”

John ran his fingers through his curly, dark hair, and scratched his scalp. *Shut up. For the love of God, please shut up.*

Finally, the professor stepped out from behind his podium. “I can see from the expression on some of your faces that you’re trying to think where you might find wood suitable for a bonfire so that you can burn me at the stake as a heretic.” Some, but not all members of the audience chuckled.

“Now, I don’t want you to think that I believe John, the Beloved Disciple, is still alive after two thousand years. I’ve just found it interesting to think, what if Jesus meant what he said when he told Peter in John 21:22, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?’”

Cavanaugh stepped behind the podium, gripped both sides, and enunciated every word of his next sentence slowly, “What if Jesus meant exactly what he said—that John would remain alive until he returned?”

John shook his head.

“I am pleased to announce that this idea also intrigues a Hollywood producer. I am in negotiations for a television series based

on a living apostle John.” Cavanaugh grinned broadly. “And with that, I will take time to autograph a few books.”

The noise from polite clapping in Pigott Auditorium at Seattle University was supplemented by the buzz around Cavanaugh’s announcement. A young woman who had been sitting next to John during the lecture turned to him and flashed him a smile. “That’s cool.” John gave her a distracted nod. But his heart started racing as he thought, *The end times couldn’t be triggered by a stupid TV show, could they?*

The man in front of John leaned over to his wife and whispered in a loud voice, “And maybe John rooms with Elvis.” John grinned.

Most of the crowd, including the couple, headed to the exits to enjoy what was left of the summer evening. As John’s eyes followed the pair to the back, he recognized a resident from the local men’s mission. The scraggly bearded man snored softly in the back row, unaware that the lecture was over. John headed to the rear of the auditorium and patted him on the shoulder.

The homeless man woke with a start. “What the—”

John grinned down at him. “Show’s over, Dave.”

A look of recognition passed over his face. “Oh, it’s you. I was just, uh...”

“No worries, buddy. The professor was a bit dry at times.” John leaned toward Dave and asked in a conspiratorial voice, “But what do you think of Cavanaugh’s idea of a movie with the Apostle Thomas as a superhero?”

“Oh, yeah.” Dave nodded enthusiastically. “I thought that was cool.”

He laughed and patted Dave on the shoulder. “You should catch the bus before it gets too late. Let’s grab some coffee after breakfast tomorrow.”

He left Dave and joined the line of autograph seekers up front. As he inched toward the book table, he could hear the supplicants

ahead of him. Several asked the one-time celebrity expert about a fine point in his talk. Others seemed bent on impressing Cavanaugh with their own knowledge of New Testament history. Many were enthusiastic about his idea for a television show and asked questions about it.

As John stood in line, he compared the picture of Cavanaugh on the back of the book with the flesh and blood author sitting behind the table. From the few silver strands in the professor's dark hair and the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes John guessed he was in his mid to late forties. Cavanaugh looked more like a television newscaster than a New Testament scholar.

When John reached the head of the line, he pushed his worn copy of *The Fate of the Apostles* across the table for an autograph. John felt a deep, simmering anger and struggled to make his words civil. He leaned toward Cavanaugh and in a measured tone he asked, "Why a show around the myth that the apostle John is still alive? Why resurrect an idea that was debunked in the second century?"

Cavanaugh raised his left eyebrow and looked across the table at John. He scanned him up and down as if he was looking for a concealed weapon.

John gave him a wan smile. "It just seems that this idea is out of line with someone of your stature, professor. You have a reputation for defending the faith."

Cavanaugh seemed to relax. "I'm not attacking our faith, young man. I'm just using an old legend to entertain people. Entertain them in a way that makes our history live."

"So, what would the apostle be doing nowadays? Why wouldn't he reveal his identity and make millions of converts?"

The professor looked up and gave him a knowing smile. "You'll just have to wait and get the answers to those questions when my series airs." He opened the book in front of him and poised his pen over the title page. He looked up at John. "And your name?"

He hesitated for a moment. "John. John Amato."

“John, same as the Apostle.”

“Wasn’t his name actually Johanan?” John pronounced the name in ancient Aramaic. The word rolled out of the back of his throat, like he was trying to clear an obstruction.

Cavanaugh gave him a sly smile. “I see you know something about the subject.” He turned back to the book to finish the inscription. “Are you a student here, John?”

John hesitated again. Finally, he said, “No, just interested in New Testament history. I teach a few classes on it myself at local churches.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Lots of things.” He shot the professor a serious look. “Basically, whatever God asks me to do.”

“Of course.” Cavanaugh closed the book and pushed it back across the table to him, once again giving John a wary look. “Keep an eye out for the show and all your questions will be answered.” He turned to a middle-aged woman in line behind John and beckoned.

John gritted his teeth and forced himself to walk out of the auditorium at a deliberate pace. As he passed through the atrium he glanced up at the tower of glass over the building exit. The fiery orange and yellow tendrils of the twenty-foot tall Dale Chihuly sculpture looked like a genetic experiment on squids gone awry. After a few moments John tore his gaze away.

He exited the hall and strode to the bike rack near the entrance. By the time he reached it, his anger had dissipated. As John strapped on his helmet, he looked skyward and concluded his internal conversation. *Just ignore Cavanaugh. It will blow over.*

He glanced at his watch. He had promised to meet Scott, his twenty-something neighbor, at Doyle’s Public House on Queen Anne hill to catch the Sounders match. Should still be early in the game. Hopefully Scott had a table staked out.

He turned on his iPod and put the earbud in his right ear as he scanned the playlists: Arabic, Afrikaans, French, and a half

dozen other languages. John selected the Hindi refresher course and strapped the player onto his arm. He turned on the rear blinker and headlamp and slung himself onto the seat of his bicycle. As he pushed off toward the pathway that passed by the chapel, he noticed the couple he had been watching earlier sitting on the edge of the reflecting pool next to the chapel.

They were holding hands. They were laughing. John stared for a moment, then finally turned his head, swallowed, and pumped hard on the pedals to take him away from the scene.

In moments, he reached the arterial that bordered the north side of the campus. John stopped to wait for the light to change and pressed the play button on the iPod. He followed the language lesson, quietly responding to the instructor.

When the light turned green he stroked the pedals hard to build up speed. He glanced around him, keeping an eye out for drivers oblivious to his presence. John kept his left ear open to listen for traffic noise. As he pedaled up hills on his route, cars moved gingerly around him. On the downhill parts he kept up with the moving vehicles.

He was heading up the street to Doyle's when motion in a narrow passageway between two buildings caught his attention. Two figures, but were they in an embrace—or a struggle? The evening light was fading so fast that in another five minutes he would have missed them entirely. He swung around for another look.

As he pulled up on the sidewalk, he could see the broad back of one of the figures. His head was covered in short, charcoal colored hair. He had the other figure in a grip. He could hear a woman pleading in heavily accented English. "Please, let me go. Don't hurt me." He placed the accent: Portuguese—Brazilian Portuguese.

The click, click, click of John's bike gears echoed in the passageway. The man jerked his head around. John realized that what he had mistaken for hair was really a dark ski mask pulled down over his head. His pale skin showed through the large holes for his

eyes and mouth. “Go away,” the man said. He flashed a large knife at John with his right hand. At a glance he could tell it was a standard military issue KA-BAR—the type of knife an amateur would pick up at a military surplus store.

His left hand firmly gripped the blouse of the woman. He shook her in warning. “Go away or I’ll cut you and her up.”

“Please, help,” the woman said. Her voice quavered with fear.

John gently laid down his bike and pulled the earphone out of his ear.

He held out both hands at his side, palms forward, to show he was unarmed. In his most soothing voice he said, “Let her go and leave right now. Nobody gets hurt.”

The man pulled the woman around in front of him and faced John. He pointed the knife at her throat. “Go away or I cut her up.” She began to plead frantically—in Portuguese.

As John’s vision adjusted to the dark, he could see heavy beads of sweat around the man’s eyes. He was breathing rapidly through his nostrils.

John stepped slowly forward. “Easy friend. Just let her go.”

In response, the man pulled the woman more tightly to his chest with his left hand. He held the blade against her throat. John noticed the corners of his eyebrows move up and together. His eyes opened wide. *The guy’s terrified. He’s no professional.* John looked at the woman. In Portuguese he calmly said, “Don’t move. Be absolutely still. Close your eyes.”

She looked at him in shock for a second, then nodded imperceptibly. She stiffened and squeezed her eyelids shut, as if she could make the scene go away. The man said, “What did you say to her? Stop that. I tell you—”

John stepped forward again. He stopped with his feet a shoulder’s width apart. “Let me give you some money. Just let her go.” He slowly reached back, pulled out his wallet, and extended it toward the man. The woman, eyes still tightly shut, began to whimper.

“I’m warning you, get out of here now,” shouted the man. He moved the tip of the blade away from the woman’s throat and pointed it at John.

“Here, take the money,” With a flip of his wrist John sent the wallet up and over the robber’s head. He kept his gaze locked on the eyes of the assailant and watched him track the arc of the bill-fold as it passed over his head.

Now! In one fluid motion John stepped forward and struck the man’s wrist with the edge of his left hand. The man shrieked in pain and the knife flew out of his grasp and ricocheted off the wall. John grasped the assailant’s wrist and pulled him forward.

The thug released the woman, who fell sideways and landed on her hands and knees. John pulled the man’s arm behind his back and then swept his legs out from under him. As he collapsed, John pushed him face first onto the cement.

He put his knee in the small of the man’s back and gripped his wrist tightly. He was trembling with anger. He took a few seconds to control his breathing before he leaned forward and said, “Don’t move. Don’t even think of it, or I *will* hurt you.”

A voice came from behind. “Dude, that was awesome.”

John looked over his shoulder. “Scott, what—”

“I was going into Doyle’s and saw you turn into the alley. Man, you kicked his—”

“Scott, call 9-1-1.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Scott pulled his phone out of his pocket and started to dial. “Where did you learn those moves?”

The masked man started to struggle. John grasped his wrist more tightly and pushed his arm higher up his back. The captive howled in pain. John let off some of the pressure and leaned over. “I told you, don’t move.”

John looked at the woman. She was sitting on the ground, face in her hands, sobbing. He asked in Portuguese: “Senhorita, are you

okay?” She looked at him and nodded. “Senhorita, you should fix your blouse.”

She looked down. Her blouse had been torn partly open in the struggle. She slowly buttoned it, then stood up, and started to brush herself off. She looked down at John who was still holding her assailant on the ground. “Obrigado—thank you. I was so afraid.” She started to sob again and sat down on the ground. She buried her face in her hands.

John said, “It’s okay. It will be all right now. It’s all over.”

The sound of a police siren split the evening. John could see Scott standing on the sidewalk, waving his arms. A squad car squealed to a stop at the entrance to the alley. Two officers jumped out and approached John, hands on the butt of their holstered weapons.

“Detective, this guy just tried to rob this young woman.” He nodded at the man under his knee.

Scott chimed in. “You should have seen my buddy take him down. He was amazing.”

The cop smiled as he pulled out a pair of handcuffs. “I’m no detective. I work for a living.” He addressed the man on the ground. “Little warm for a stocking mask, don’t you think?” He jerked it off his head. The second cop knelt down next to the young woman.

The captive moaned as the officer cuffed his right wrist. John released him and the cop finished cuffing him and then pulled the mugger firmly to his feet. The unmasked man howled with pain as the handcuff pulled at his knife hand.

“Dude, what happened to your ankle?” said Scott.

John looked at Scott, then down. A long cut on his left ankle, right above the sock, was bleeding into his shoe. He felt the warm blood pooling under his foot. John sat down and started to gently pull off the shoe. “The knife must have hit me when I knocked it free. Looks like it only cut the flesh.”

“Man, we should call you an ambulance.” Scott pulled out his phone.

“No need. Just get me the first aid kit off my bike.” He pointed to a pouch on the handlebars. Scott rushed to retrieve it.

The second officer bent over John’s ankle. “Does look like a nasty wound. The EMTs are on the way to take a look at the young lady.”

John pulled a gauze pack out of his kit and wiped away the blood. The cut was deep, but the flow was already slowing. “That’s alright. I can bandage it up myself.” As John cleaned the wound and taped on a gauze compress, he gave the officer the basics about the attack.

The officer passed him a business card. “That’s a good start, Mr. Amato. But we’d like to get an official statement. If you wouldn’t mind coming down to the station.”

John nodded as he laced up his bloody shoe. “I’ll be there in an hour.”



As John entered the lobby of the police station, his phone rang—Mozart—a ringtone that indicated it had been forwarded from a number still used by only a few people. He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the display: *Greta Wallenberg*.

He answered with the gravelly voice of an old man with a noticeable, but not thick, German accent. “Ja?”

“Mr. Fischer?” The voice was familiar, even though he hadn’t heard it for a decade.

“Yes. Is this Greta?”

“It is.”

He chuckled, the friendly chuckle of a kindly old man. “Well then, you know to call me Johannes, or at least John.”

Silence ensued. Finally she said, “Johannes. It’s my father.” She stifled a sob. “Franz is dead.”

Chapter Two

*No man has ever lived that had enough of children's
gratitude or woman's love.*

William Butler Yeats



I CAN'T BELIEVE HE'S *dumping me with a text.*

Nicole Logan glanced down at her phone as she hurried down the jetway. Dan wanted to take a break? Fine. Nicole stared at the screen and tried to believe it really was fine.

She shoved the phone into her laptop bag and glanced up in time to see the man in front of her had stopped. She stumbled, fell forward, and planted her face hard between his shoulder blades.

Nicole took a step back as she rubbed her nose. She blinked and looked up.

The deeply tanned man was looking over his shoulder at her. He scanned her up and down—his gaze lingered like a pastry chef critically assessing a cheesecake. Then he glanced down at her legs below the hem of her business skirt. Finally he looked back at her and smiled.

She flashed an embarrassed smile. “Should have watched where I’m going.”

“No problem.” He smiled again.

She broke her gaze and nodded at the passengers in front of him. “Looks like we’re moving again.” She glanced at his left hand, which was holding the shoulder strap on his laptop bag. No wedding ring—but there was a tan line where one would normally be.

He glanced forward. “Looks like.” He turned back and gave her one last smile. “Bump into you later, I hope.”

She smirked, smoothed her gray skirt and shuffled forward.

Nicole passed through the hatch of the Alaska Airlines 737, gave the flight attendant a perfunctory smile, and turned down the aisle. She frowned as she passed through the first class cabin. She had been number one on the standby list for a comfy seat up front but the whole section had checked in. Now she was dragging her gear to seat 29C, just ahead of the toilets.

The man she had bumped into stopped just behind first class. He stepped out of the aisle to let her pass. “Bye for now.”

Nicole nodded but didn’t respond.

She reached the back row and saw a man with dark, curly hair occupied the window seat. He was wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt that featured 1930’s era seaplanes in tropical settings. He glanced up at her from his notebook computer and gave her a distracted smile. Nicole guessed he was in his early to mid-thirties, slightly older than she was. She dropped her laptop bag onto the seat and started to lift her rolling suitcase. “I can give you a hand,” he said.

“No need. I’m used to hauling this around.” As she grunted and pushed it into the overhead bin, she regretted having packed a full set of workout gear, extra baggage that had again gone unused. After she shoved it into place she put her laptop bag on the floor in front of her seat. Her companion had turned back to his computer and was scowling at it. She sat down, pulled her phone out of the bag, then pushed the case underneath the seat.

The text message still waited for her on the screen of the phone, like a taunt: *Nicole, I think it's best for us and the company if we take a break from our relationship.*

She gritted her teeth and squeezed the armrest with her free hand.

As she contemplated composing a pithy response to Dan's text, the man next to her banged his hand on the tray table next to his laptop and sucked air in through his teeth. She jerked her head to look over at him.

"Sorry," he said and gave her a sheepish grin. "I'm trying to read this financial report and it doesn't make sense to me."

She turned back to the text message on her phone, then looked over at her companion's screen. "Do you want me to take a look? I know a bit about finance."

His eyes grew wide with delight. "That would be great." He passed it over the empty middle seat onto her tray table.

She quickly scanned the report. "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to decide if I should invest in this company. I used to have a friend who made decisions like that for me."

He seemed to have a slight accent she'd originally overlooked. Italian? Greek? She couldn't quite place it. She perused the figures and scrolled down. "Where's your friend now?" she asked absentmindedly.

"He passed on—several weeks ago. I'm on my way to visit his daughter."

She looked over at the man. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I'm going to miss him terribly, but he was in his eighties and happy and healthy to the end." He flashed her a smile. "He's truly home now."

Nicole gave him a wan smile. *One of them.*

He gestured at the notebook on her tray table. "But now I'm trying to figure out this stuff on my own."

Nicole turned back to the screen. She noticed the Dell was

well used. Some of the lettering on the keyboard was almost worn off and the upper right casing on the screen had been crushed and inexpertly glued back together.

“How did you come to know finances?”

She kept her eyes on the screen as she answered. “I work as a consultant on accounting software systems. We install them at mid-sized companies.” She scanned through several pages of the report. “I’m also a partner in a firm I founded with a friend.” She blinked rapidly to clear her eyes.

He whistled. “Looks like I found the right seat mate.”

“How much do you have to invest?”

He hesitated before responding softly. “A lot.”

“A lot?” She looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

He grinned like a mischievous kid who had been caught drinking milk directly out of the carton. “Miss, we’ve just met.”

“Mister....”

“Amato. John Amato.” He extended his hand. She shook it firmly. *If you’re going to compete in the world of men, shake hands like a man* her dad had taught her.

“Nicole Logan.” She dropped his hand and turned back to the screen. “So now that we know each other maybe you can tell me how much you have to invest.”

He paused. She turned to look at him. For the first time she looked directly into his deep brown eyes. She felt like she was looking into a wise old soul rather than the eyes of a thirty something guy. He looked back as if he was trying to take a measure of her. Uncharacteristically flustered, she finally broke the gaze.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, Mr. Amato.”

“No, that’s okay, Ms. Logan. But call me John. Even my father didn’t go by Mr. Amato.”

She glanced back and he flashed a grin.

A muffled announcement came through the intercom: “Ladies and gentlemen, we’re almost ready to close the door and pull away

from the gate. Please put away your electronic devices and make sure your seat belts are fastened and your tray tables and seats are upright and locked.”

Nicole passed the notebook back to John. He closed it, slid it into a worn leather backpack, and shoved it underneath the seat in front of him.

As the plane started to back away from the gate, the flight attendants launched into their safety patter. Nicole turned back to John.

He asked, “What do you think? Good investment?”

She wrinkled her nose. “From what you showed me, not so much. Their sales figures for the last few years are flat. Most companies in that market are growing.”

“Oh.”

“So, again, how much do you have to invest?”

He looked into her eyes and with a sly smile said, “Millions. Tens of millions.”

She laughed. “You have tens of millions of dollars, but a beat up computer, and you’re sitting in the blue water row on a passenger jet?”

A puzzled look crossed his face. “Blue water row?”

With a jerk of her head she indicated the bulkhead behind them. “The row just ahead of the bathrooms.” She wrinkled her nose. “For the blue disinfectant they use in the toilet system.”

“I’ll have to remember that one.” He laughed.

She scowled at him. “I have to admit, ‘I have tens of millions’ is one of the more clever pickup lines anyone has ever tried on me.”

He looked at her, eyes wide in surprise. “I would never do that. I really do have that kind of money to invest. But—it’s actually not even mine. It really belongs to three very close friends. I’m just their agent.”

“Can’t they find another person with a little more—financial acumen?”

“People are my thing, not numbers. But I’m the one they trust. She sat silent for a minute. “Seems like trust is so rare in this day and age.”

He nodded. “I haven’t always been the most reliable partner for them, but they’ve always been there for me.”

“How long have you known them?”

“Since I was very young.” He paused to look out the window as the plane turned onto the runway. “In many respects they’re my family.”

Their conversation paused while the engines spun up and the plane hurtled down the ribbon of concrete. The crescendo of engines, rattling tray tables, and tires on concrete climaxed when the plane lifted into the sky. In a few minutes it leveled off and the noise faded.

Finally Nicole looked back at John. “So what are you going to do with all this money?”

He grinned his broad grin again. “Change the world.”

Her business radar triggered like a 747 had just popped up on her scope. “Do you have a company or something?”

“Nope. Just me and a couple of friends.”

Her interest faded—more like a Cessna than a jumbo jet. Their conversation was broken up by the captain’s announcement that the aircraft was passing through ten thousand feet and it was now safe to turn on electronic devices. Nicole reached under the seat in front of her and pulled out her own laptop bag.

“If you don’t mind, I have to finish a status report before we land.” She fired up her laptop and was soon immersed in her work. John pulled out his own notebook and left her in peace.

“Miss?” Nicole looked up at the flight attendant standing next to her. The sandy haired young man was holding a single serving sized bottle of wine with a plastic cup inverted over the top.

Nicole cocked her eyebrow. “Yes?”

“A gentleman sitting toward the front of the plane sent this back for you.”

“How do you know it’s for me?”

“He described a pretty woman with shoulder length, reddish brown hair in a stylish gray suit.” He smiled. “He also said your nose would match a dent in the center of his back.”

Nicole rubbed her nose. “That would be me.” She looked at the offering in the attendant’s hand. “Normally I wouldn’t, but this has been a day.” She moved her laptop to make space.

The flight attendant set down a paper napkin on Nicole’s tray. As he reached for the cup on the top of the bottle, the plane bucked suddenly. He lost his balance and started to fall across Nicole’s tray table. She jerked back to avoid a collision. John’s hand shot across in front of her and clamped onto the attendant’s forearm, stopping him in mid-fall. The bottle in his hand popped into the air. Nicole watched as if it were in slow motion. The cup flew off the top of the bottle and both sailed in an arc toward the window.

John reached up and snatched the bottle out of the air with his left hand. The cup bounced off the wall of the cabin, ricocheted off the window, and finally clattered to rest on his tray table.

The attendant regained his footing and John released his forearm. “I am so sorry,” he said. He reached over and retrieved the cup.

“No worries,” said John, passing him the wine. “At least the bottle wasn’t open yet.”

As the attendant removed the screw cap and poured, Nicole looked at John. “Are you some kind of athlete? That looked like something out of a superhero movie.”

John grinned, sheepishly. “I like racquetball.”

The attendant finished pouring and said, “Compliments of Mr. Barker.”

“Tell him thank you—and sorry for the dent in his back.”

“Of course.” He turned back toward the front of the jetliner. Nicole stared at the wine.

“Secret admirer?” John asked. She looked at him and frowned.

“No, just someone I ran into on the jetway.” She rubbed her nose. “Ran into, *literally*.” She picked up the cup. “I guess this is his pickup line.” She lifted it to her lips and savored a long sip.

“You mentioned it’s been a day.”

“I guess I did.”

“I’m a good listener.”

She looked at the seat back in front of her and placed the glass down on the table next to her laptop. “I hardly know you.”

“Even better. What you tell me goes nowhere.”

She looked over at him and found herself looking again into his inviting brown eyes. “Okay, Mr. Going to Change the World. My boyfriend dumped me—dumped me by text.”

“Ouch.”

She frowned. “He’s also my boss, and my business partner.”

“How long have you been dating?”

“Five years.” She closed her eyes. “I thought he was the one.”

I’m so sorry.”

She opened her eyes and turned away. *Pull yourself together, Nicole.*

He gently touched her forearm.

At his touch she flinched. “Why am I telling you this? I barely know you.”

“Like I said, I’m a good listener. I have that effect on people.”

His smile tugged at her soul but her will urged that she regain some semblance of cool.

“Are you a shrink or something?”

“I work as a counselor. That is, when I’m not trying to save the world.”

She touched the sleeve of his Hawaiian shirt that sported the collection of seaplanes. “This is rather odd attire for a counselor. I

picture them in button down shirts and ties. People who want to be taken seriously.”

He glanced down at his sleeve and grinned. “Shirts like this help people relax. And think of something other than Seattle winters.”

She laughed, dabbed her eyes with the napkin again, and gave into the urge to blow her nose. Finally she asked, “So, how are you planning to save the world?”

He gave her a knowing smile. “I barely know you.”

She laughed again. “Fair enough.”

“Do you want to tell me about your boyfriend?”

She hesitated, then with a wavering voice finally said, “We met when we were working for a large consulting firm. Four years ago we figured we could do it better and started our own company. We called it DANISoft for the initials of the four co-owners. My boyfriend—ex boyfriend—loves it because his name is Dan.”

“So you’re partners?”

“Me, Dan and two others. There are twenty of us at the company in total.”

John waited.

“He’s actually the president and majority owner. He raided his trust fund for most of our startup costs. Plus, he’s a natural leader.”

“Sounds like a good partner.”

“He has been—up until recently.”

“Recently?”

Nicole clenched her fists and looked at the seat back in front of her. “I’ve always felt like I was beneath him. He went to Stanford on a full ride daddy-and-mommy scholarship. I came from the wrong side of Oakland and had to work my way through a local business college as a waitress and through student loans—loans I repaid.”

“School of hard knocks?”

She laughed. “Pretty much. But when I started at the consult-

ing firm I managed to outwork all those silver spooners and earn a rep as the girl who makes things happen.” She held up her hand like she was wearing a sock puppet and moved her thumb and fingers together. “Blah, blah, blah. I’m sure you’ve hear this sad story a hundred times before Mr. Counselor.”

He shook his head. “Everyone has a unique story.”

The beverage and snack cart arrived at their row. Both asked for club soda with lime. Nicole started to tuck the packaged cookie the flight attendant gave her into the seat pocket in front of her, then offered it to John.

He took it from her. “Not hungry?”

“Yeah, but when I’m on the road my diet is terrible.”

He laughed. “Doesn’t look to me like your diet is terrible.”

“Boy, you really are a good counselor.”

“Just an honest one.” He started to unwrap the cookie and then held it between his fingers and mouthed a silent prayer.

Nicole watched him out of the corner of her eye. When he was done she said, “You say grace over an airline cookie?”

“There’ve been times when I would have been very grateful for a cookie. And thanks to you, I have two.” He held his hand up like it was a sock puppet and moved his thumb and fingers together. “But blah, blah, blah. I’m sure you’ve heard that before.”

“Bravo, counselor.” She laughed.

John took a bite out of his cookie and chewed slowly. He swallowed and asked, “So, back to you and your boyfriend?”

She pursed her lips and picked up the remainder of the wine. She gave John a wry smile. “If he tries to get rid of me, he’s dead meat. Half of our business depends on my reputation.” She drained the plastic cup. Nicole pulled her laptop toward her. “I should get back to work. What do I owe you for my session in the blue water row?”

“What do I owe for the financial advice?”

“Good. We’ll call it even.” She turned to the screen and started to type furiously.

An hour later the captain announced their approach to San Francisco International Airport. Nicole tucked away her laptop and turned her attention to John. “So, you know all about my troubles. And I know you’re visiting the daughter of your friend. Are you from Seattle?”

“Nope. I’ve been there about a year, but was in the city before.”

“Are you from the Bay Area?”

“No, I came to this country from Kosovo, after the civil war.”

“Oh, that explains the faint accent. But your English is excellent.”

“Thanks. I learned to speak the language long before I moved here. But I work hard to speak like the locals.”

“I lived in Germany for a few years when I was a kid. My dad was an Air Force security cop at a little air base south of Frankfurt. I should have learned more of the language than I did. Might have helped in a few business deals.”

Another announcement from the cockpit interrupted their conversation. The aircraft started a precipitous descent, like the pilot was late for luxury suite tickets at a Giants game.

John glanced toward the cockpit, then turned back to Nicole. “So, if I need more financial advice, how do I reach you?”

She gave him a thoughtful look. She really didn’t know him, despite how quickly she had warmed to him. “Why don’t you give me your card and I’ll call you when I need some counseling. Then we’ll trade services.”

He pulled a card out of a pocket on his leather backpack. It read “John Amato, Fisher of Men” JohnZAmato@gmail.com, and his phone number.

“John Z Amato? What’s the Z for?”

He flashed a coy smile. “It’s an old, hard to pronounce, family name.”

She glanced back at the card. “I don’t suppose you’re on LinkedIn.”

He shook his head. “No. Not into social media.”

She wanted to ask him if he was in a witness protection program, but resisted the urge.

The plane touched down and five minutes later they were pulling up to the gate. As Nicole towed her suitcase up the jetway, she noticed the man she had bumped into earlier was standing just inside the terminal, cell phone to his ear, facing the line of passengers exiting the plane. She turned toward John. “Please, play along with me.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him close, making sure they walked up the jetway side by side.

“What is this—”

She leaned into his shoulder. “Please, just play along.”

As they walked into the terminal, Mr. Barker put away the phone and looked toward the line of disembarking passengers. When he caught Nicole’s eye he smiled. Then he noticed John on her arm and frowned. As they walked past him Nicole winked and said, “Thanks for the drink. Bump into you later.”

Nicole, John still firmly in tow, turned to the left toward the International Terminal and BART station. John started to look over his shoulder. “Did I just help you ditch that guy?”

“Quiet. He’s probably right behind us.” As she pulled him closer she could feel the muscles in his upper arm were firm, but not bulky. More like an endurance athlete than a body builder.

As it turned out, both of them were riding the same train; Nicole to her apartment, John to the home of his recently deceased friend. He got off several stops before Nicole. As he stepped off he pointed at her, “Don’t forget our plan to trade services. I need your advice.”

She smiled and nodded, expecting to never see the curly haired man from the Mediterranean again. Five minutes later, she

was towing her suitcase up the hill from the Powell Street station toward her condo.

Despite the warm evening, she was hassled by only a few street people on her walk home. As she pulled her bag up the front sidewalk of the turn of the century Victorian turned into condos, she thought she should really sell and move out of the Tenderloin district to someplace more upscale and safer. She had thought her next move would be into Dan's place in Pacific Heights. But that dream was evidently dead.

As she unpacked, she considered her next step. Call Dan and have it out with him? Let him make the next move? She pulled her Nikes out of her suitcase and held them up in front of her. Better idea: take a run and cool off before she decided on a course of action.

She dressed, stretched, and was soon pushing up the hill toward Fisherman's Wharf. She passed the imposing Grace Cathedral, which looked to her like it had been transported directly from medieval Europe. The French Gothic style house of worship was beautiful inside, or so she had been told.

Thanks to a favorable wind, refreshing salt air occasionally brushed aside the acrid smell of auto exhaust. As she attacked her route with short but powerful strides, she considered what was wrong. Things had seemed to be going so well with Dan both at work and in their personal life. Why had things gone sour in the last month, and ended with an abrupt text message this afternoon?

Her route passed several regular hangouts that were indelibly tied up with her life with Dan. The Peet's Coffee they met at most mornings. The little park they would walk to when the weather was sunny and they wanted a break from the office; the French bakery where she stopped to pick up pastries for Friday morning staff meetings. She had cherished these places. Now each one she passed reminded her that her life plan had been derailed.

As she pushed up toward the crest of the hill, sweat began to trickle down her back. Nicole leaned forward, pumped her arms, and reached the top. As she descended toward a cluster of restaurants, a pearl gray Lexus convertible, top down, approached from the street on the right. Dan? It turned down the street, heading away from her. From the passenger seat, long, blonde hair flowed in the gentle wind. Nicole glanced down at the license plate. Even from half a block away she could read it: DANISOFT. She slowed to a stop and stepped into the shadow of a phone pole as the Lexus pulled up to the curb and stopped in front of Chez Monique, a favorite special occasion hangout. Six weeks ago they had gone there together. That night she felt he was on the verge of popping the question. But Nicole had gone home without a rock on her finger.

The valet stepped to the curb and opened up the passenger door, bowing slightly and holding out his hand to assist the blonde. Out stepped a slender woman in a spaghetti strap cocktail dress. She flipped her head and gossamer hair cascaded over bare shoulders. Dan, dressed in his favorite Brooks Brothers suit—a suit Nicole had helped him select—walked around the back of the car and passed the keys to the valet. As the woman turned toward Dan and took his arm, everything fell into place.

Penny Walker. Penny Walker whose family had a stake in enough real estate and businesses in the Bay Area to influence every important local decision from behind the scenes. Penny Walker who had engaged DANISoft several months back to plan for a new accounting system for her family's holding company. Nicole had been the logical person to manage the project, but Dan had taken it on himself, saying they needed her to focus on the Neely Seafoods project in Seattle. Glamorous Penny Walker, from the right side of the tracks, who could advance Dan's career in ways Nicole never could.

Nicole leaned forward on her right foot, ready to sprint the

half block down the hill to confront Dan there and then. As Penny and Dan stepped toward the door of Chez Monique, Nicole hesitated. No, she needed a better plan than that. She waited until they were inside and then continued on her route to the waterfront, fists clenched as she sprinted past the restaurant.



John ducked into the men's room at the BART station. The memory of his encounter with Nicole Logan on the flight down from Seattle lingered. Something about her air of confidence, bordering on cocky, fascinated him. Not to mention her polished good looks. The prospect that she might call him excited him. Then he caught himself. Even if she did call, it could never lead to anything.

He glanced around the men's room. The strong antiseptic smell stung his nostrils. The restroom was sparsely populated with only a few commuters doing their business. John scanned the row of stalls and selected the one on the far end.

After pulling the door behind him, he hung his backpack on a hook and pulled a small leather pouch out of his suitcase. He unzipped the pouch and hung it on the same hook. A small mirror was mounted on the inside top of the case. The bottom had a neat array of small combs and a costume beard and mustache. Several travel size shampoo and mouthwash containers were in the plastic bag that had gone through the TSA scanners and been tucked into his carry on. He pulled out the one that was labeled mouthwash and went to work.

Thirty minutes later a gray haired old man with a neatly trimmed white beard shuffled out of the stall. John's leather jacket had been replaced by a wrinkled blue blazer. The backpack had been stuffed into the suitcase. The disguise was completed with a set of bifocals and a collapsible cane. As John worked his way toward the exit, he glanced over at his image in the mirror.

The eyes were those of a young man, but the skin was that of a senior citizen.

He walked the twelve blocks to the home of his old friend, Franz, careful to maintain the pace of an octogenarian. When he reached the steps of the turn of the century Victorian he pulled the suitcase up behind him, step by step, like a climber on the last stage of a Himalayan peak. He affected a wheeze and pressed the doorbell.

It took only a few moments for Greta to open the door. She was slightly more plump and gray haired than the last time he'd seen her, but still sported the blonde hair and regal facial structure of her Teutonic ancestors. John found it hard to believe she had never married. If it had been possible, he would have married her himself.

Tears sprang into Greta's eyes. She hesitated, then stepped into his embrace. "Johannes. It's so good to see you."

For several hours John and Greta shared stories about her father—some new, many familiar. He finally ended with how the two had met on a train in Italy, six decades before. "We were an unlikely pair of young men: two survivors of Auschwitz. Me on a mission from God to make a pile of money and a Jewish banker unsure of his faith."

She smiled a wan smile. "Obviously it was meant to be. Without my father, you never would have become wealthy." She touched the sleeve of John's jacket. "And without you, he never would have followed Jeshua."

"We have been good for each other." He picked up a cup of tea from the side board. "I am so sorry I couldn't make it to his funeral."

She touched his forearm. "He would have understood. And it's difficult to travel at your age."

John grinned. "Young lady, are you disparaging my age? I still feel like a man of thirty three." He leaned over and coughed.

She passed him a tissue from the box on the coffee table. “No slight intended. You are certainly one of the more fit men in his 80’s I know.”

“You don’t know the twentieth of it.” He wiped his mouth with the tissue. “I still wish I could have been there to say good-bye to Franz.”

Greta reached for the teapot. John waved her off. “I must be going to my hotel. I do need some rest.”

“Of course. Let me pull the car around front and I’ll give you a ride.” As she stood she asked, “Who will manage your portfolio now? Can you do it yourself?”

He chuckled. “No, that’s not for me. But don’t worry, I will find someone.” He leaned on his cane and pulled himself to his feet.

She grabbed her purse. “I’ll get the car and meet you at the front door. Don’t try to take those front stairs on your own. I know how stubborn you are.” She raised an eyebrow. “Promise?”

He raised his hand like he was being sworn in as a witness. “I promise. No ending our visit with a tumble into the street.”

She turned and headed toward the back exit and John made his way to stand just inside the front door. He looked around the modest home Greta had shared with Franz. His old friend had been the last critical connection to Johannes Fischer. Now it was time for that identity to fade into history like so many others.

He glanced down at the end table near the door. In the upper right corner on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly* was a picture of Professor Cavanaugh with a caption: Heresy or Just TV?

He picked up the magazine and quickly flipped to the article. A reporter had interviewed a number of church leaders and theologians about Cavanaugh’s proposed television show. Several quotes stood out. One fundamentalist preacher with a large television ministry suggested the biblical record clearly showed John was dead and that anyone who disputed it would “...burn in hell when his time came.” A University of Notre Dame historian

remarked, “While the professor’s premise for the show is fanciful, there is nothing in or outside of the Bible or the historical record that definitively describes the fate of the last apostle.”

Cavanaugh himself had the closing remark: “Nobody on this earth really knows for sure now, do they?”

John snorted and tossed the magazine down on the table.

Chapter Three

*Saints...die to the world only to
rise to a more intense life.*

Lynn M. Poland



100 AD

IT WAS A cool, spring night on the eastern shores of the Aegean Sea, near the town of Ephesus. Johanan bar Zebedee, the sole remaining apostle of Jesus Christ, was being carried from the shores of the azure waters to his hut. The withered arms of the century old man were draped around two of his own disciples.

They sat him in a chair padded with several blankets to protect his parchment thin skin. He leaned back and raised one wrinkled hand to shade his eyes from the setting sun. A young man grabbed a fan and shielded Johanan's eyes from the light. The old man lowered his hand to his lap and gazed toward the ocean, watching a small fleet of fishing boats come in from the labors of the day.

A dozen disciples sat on the ground next to the apostle's chair

and peered out at the sunset as well. His aged eyes could only see blurry outlines of the boat hulls and sails.

He asked, “Does it look like they had a good day?”

“Yes, they’re all riding low in the water,” the man holding the fan said.

Others murmured in agreement.

The scene brought back fond memories of the days when a young Johanan fished with his father Zebedee’s fleet, before he left all to follow Jesus.

Johanan turned his head to look in the room behind him. Several scribes had ceased their work of copying the gospel penned by Johanan, or one of his many letters, to enjoy the peaceful scene themselves.

He turned back to the scene on the sea. “Little children,” Johanan said in a raspy voice, “as the sun sets so does my life.”

Johanan paused to catch his breath. His exile to the marble quarry at Patmos, decades ago, had coated his lungs with a thin film of stone dust. The effort to speak cost him dearly.

“You must never forget what the Lord taught me. Love one another.”

A young man at his feet turned to him. “Teacher, why do you always say the same thing? Why don’t you tell us stories of the Christos?”

The apostle leaned over and put his hand on the shoulder of the young man. “It is the Lord’s command, and if this alone be done, it is enough.”

The young man nodded and turned his gaze back to the incoming fishing boats.

As Johanan leaned back, he thought that soon enough it would be time for him to go. The writings left by him, his fellow apostles, and other church leaders would have to carry the message. He had no energy to do it himself.



Johanen lay on a straw filled mattress set on the floor. Rolled up blankets elevated his head and upper torso to help him breathe. A small fire burned in a brazier near the window to keep away the chill of the night air. Moonlight showed through the partly open window shutter above the fire. On a short stool next to his bed sat a simple clay cup filled with wine. A drink before bed aided his sleep, and periodic sips throughout the night soothed his dry throat. An oil lamp, recently extinguished by one of his loyal companions, sat next to the cup. Several times during the night someone would come into his room to tend the fire in the brazier and make sure he was comfortable. Johanen suspected they were also checking to see if he was still alive.

As Johanen drifted into sleep, he became aware of a presence at his bedside, as if in a dream. He opened his eyes, and there stood Jesus, clothed in brilliant white, just as he'd seen him at his transfiguration seven decades before. The light filled the room as if it was daylight.

"My Lord and my God." His heart beat faster and his eyes watered with joy at the sight.

"Johanen, my beloved disciple. You have done well. But now I have a new commandment for you."

"My Lord, it is my time to go with you." He struggled to sit up, finally propping himself up on his elbow. "I have been waiting for this day for many, many years."

"No, my good and faithful servant. You will leave this community and travel the world. Many of my sheep have never heard my name. You must spread my message to all nations."

"My Lord, I am an old man. I am ready to come home with you." He wheezed as he struggled to catch his breath. "To live with you, and my brothers and sisters."

"No, Son of Thunder." Jesus leaned in and placed his hand

firmly on Johanan's arm. Johanan felt a tingle where Jesus' hand touched his arm. In a moment, the sensation spread up his arm and throughout his body. Jesus withdrew his hand and smiled down at Johanan. "You will live as other men and show them my love through your life. But from this day forward you may never tell anyone who you are."

"But Lord, I am old..."

Jesus' visage became grim. "Know that many powers will oppose you because of what you do in my name. At times the trials you've been through until now will seem as nothing."

"But, how will I—"

"Johanan, my beloved disciple," Jesus said, "go down to the shore and you will find a boat with a man in it. He is there to help you start your new life. Remember: you may never tell anyone who you are. Never. And you must share the good news with all nations before we are reunited in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Jesus stood before him and smiled down on Johanan. The light grew in intensity, until Johanan finally had to close his eyes because of the brilliance. "Go now and know I am with you always."

He awoke and sat bolt upright from the dream, breathing hard, as if he had just finished a foot race. He continued to pant, in exhilaration from the vivid vision.

Wait. He was sitting up without pain, breathing hard—not wheezing.

He felt like a young man full of energy. Not like a centenarian looking forward to the peace of death. He looked over at the fire. He could clearly see the patterns of deep orange flame on the coals, rather than the dim glow he'd grown used to seeing through his failing eyes. He looked at the back of his hand in the moonlight and saw the skin of a young man, not the sallow flesh of his recent years.

He was confused and exhilarated. Then he remembered the command: "Go now."

Johanan pulled back his blankets and swung his feet over to the

dirt floor. He jumped nimbly to his feet and moved slowly across the room. He gently eased the door open and stepped out into the night.

He could clearly see the brilliance of the individual stars above and hear the splashing of waves on the nearby shore. Johanan started walking toward the beach and then broke into a sprint, reveling in his newfound energy. He could feel the cool sand between his toes. As he pushed off with each step, he noted the absence of pain in the joints. He resisted the urge to burst into joyous laughter.

As Johanan approached the shore, his pace slowed. He walked gingerly over a band of rocks to the soft sand near the water. He now regretted he had left his sandals back in the hut. He waded into the surf in his bare feet, pulling up the hem of his nightshirt to keep it dry. Tears of excitement rolled down his face.

He remembered his instructions from Jesus, and looked up and down the shoreline. There, away from the houses, on the beach, he could see a short mast in the moonlight. He broke into a sprint as he ran toward the small boat.

As he came upon it he could see the bow was beached on the sand, but the stern was still in the water. It rocked gently in the waves. It was a small fishing vessel, more suitable for a lake than for the Aegean; big enough only for two, maybe three men. He looked into the boat. There, facedown, in water deep enough to cover his head, was the body of a man. Johanan turned him over and was surprised to see how old he was. The face was bruised and cut. Being soaked in salt water had swollen and distorted his features. Evidently he had fallen in the boat, injured himself, and died. Or maybe he had died first of natural causes, and then collapsed into the bottom of the hull.

Johanan placed his arms under the body. With his renewed strength, he lifted the man and carried him up onto the beach. He placed the corpse gently on the sand. In the moonlight he could see he was a frail old man about the size of Johanan. Looking more

closely, he noticed the fisherman closely resembled him, or at least the Johanan who had gone to bed last night. They could have been brothers. The battering he had taken only served to hide any differences. This was clearly the man sent to help him start his new life.

As this man was dead, so must Johanan be. He quickly stripped off his nightshirt. As he did he marveled at the young flesh and firm muscles that had reappeared in his formerly withered body. He gently removed the clothes from the body of the fisherman. Johanan redressed him reverently in his own garment. He looked down at the ring on his own finger given to him by his own disciples a decade before. It was a simple bronze band with the inscription of the ichthys, or fish. This secret symbol of believers had gained popularity during recent decades. With a lump in his throat he removed the ring and placed it on the finger of his deceased companion. It fit, perfectly.

Johanan dressed himself in the wet clothes of the old man and then lifted the body in his arms. With no real plan in mind he started back up the beach, carrying the man who would take his place. He walked along the shoreline in the gentle surf where the beach was sandy. Johanan's heart was still pounding with adrenaline and the old man was so light that he easily carried him. When he reached the point opposite his hut, he stopped and turned. He started up across the sharp rocks toward the dwellings, and then stopped. He looked down at the face of the man and then back at the ocean.

Johanan hesitated. Then he backed into the water and walked up the beach in the surf to cover his tracks. He reached a stretch with sharp rocks just above the high tide line. He reverently laid the fisherman face down with the lower part of his body in the water. The tide was receding and the body would be left there for his companions to find. The cuts and distortions on his face caused by his journey in the bottom of the boat would hide most of the differences. They would not be expecting to find someone else in Johanan's clothing. He expected they would assume he had wandered out

in the night, fallen, and then washed up on the beach. And if someone did notice he looked different than Johanan?

“Lord, you’ve made blind eyes see, now make seeing eyes blind.”

He backed into the water again and said to the old fisherman, “Thank you for what you are doing for me.”

Johanan turned and sprinted through the surf toward the boat. He reached it in moments but found the tide had receded and the vessel was farther up on the shore. He strained mightily to push it back. With strength he had not wielded for many decades, he finally managed to inch it over the sand until it floated free. Johanan pushed the boat into the surf until the water was up above his knees. Then he pushed off of the bottom and pulled himself up and over the side where he fell into the bottom of the small fishing vessel. He grabbed the oars, turned the boat around, and began to dig into the water. His years of earning his trade as a fisherman served him well. He handled the boat with ease and began to head out to sea. As he did, he could see all was quiet in the direction of the collection of dwellings where he had lived with his followers. Johanan began to stroke in a smooth rhythm, pulling steadily away from the community on the shore near Ephesus.

He looked in the direction of the body he had deposited on the beach and mouthed a quiet prayer of thanks. Then he looked toward the horizon. As he had watched the setting sun last evening, the horizon had seemed very near. Now, even in the dark, it seemed distant, very distant.

Johanan rowed steadily until the shore faded from sight. He raised the small sail and adjusted it to catch the wind blowing off-shore. He grabbed the steering oar and steered the boat directly downwind to put as much distance between him and his Ephesian home as possible.

His rejuvenated body was exhilarating. In the light of the full moon he looked at the smooth skin on the back of his hand again. He turned it and noticed the deep scar on his palm was gone; a scar

he'd had since a knife accident in his youth on his father's fishing boat. He looked up and down his arms and noticed other disfigurements from working the quarry on Patmos, from minor burns, or other incidents over his century of life were gone. The marks on his ankles from shackles he'd worn during various imprisonments were gone as well. He had the skin of a man reborn.

But the rejuvenation went deeper than his skin. He felt strength he'd been missing for many decades. He was used to being exhausted and having to conserve his energy. But now, he felt like a Roman catapult unleashed. He gazed up at the blanket of stars overhead. The clarity of each individual point of light amazed him. In recent years, he would have seen a milky cloud through his aged eyes. His vision dimmed as tears of joy filled his eyes.

Then he thought back to his encounter only an hour ago with the Messiah. It had been over seventy years since he had seen Him ascend bodily into heaven and years since he'd seen visions of Him he had recorded in the prophetic letter to the seven churches in Asia. Johanan thought back to the encounter earlier that evening and the words of Jesus.

He shook his head. He had expected to die and pass on to heaven any day. This situation was totally unexpected.

As the boat ran with the wind across the Aegean Sea, Johanan's mind raced as it hadn't for decades. He would need to find a place where he could blend in and start his new life. How was he going to share the love of the Christos if he couldn't tell people he was Johanan, the Beloved Disciple, the companion of the Christos? Frankly, he had enjoyed being the center of attention among the growing community of believers.

"Oh Lord." Tears ran down his cheeks, "Why couldn't you have just brought me home?"

Johanan looked up at the stars, this time with the eye of an experienced sailor. The boat was heading due west, toward the mainland of Greece. He could go to Corinth, the capital of the Achaean

province. There was an active Christian community there. However, there were also many church elders in Corinth who remembered the younger Johanan. They might ask difficult questions.

Athens was also in that general direction. He knew of a church there and had heard the name of Strabo, their leader, though he didn't know any of their members personally. That might be a more suitable location for him to begin a new life. Far enough from Ephesus but close enough for this little vessel to reach within a space of a month, if the winds held.

He secured the steering oar and began to explore the vessel. Several clay jars stowed in a compartment up front contained fresh water. A leather bag contained dried fish and dates. One jar contained salt—enough to preserve a good sized catch. A clay pot contained charcoal for cooking. On top of it was a flint and steel along with a small bag of tinder. He found another leather bag underneath the one with the fish. This one had additional charcoal, wet from contact with the water in the bottom of the vessel. He placed the bag on top of the compartment so it would dry and continued his exploration. Worn nets were stowed on either side of the mast. An old wooden bowl floated in the water on the bottom of the boat. It looked like it was suitable for bailing; something that was desperately needed in this creaky, leaky vessel. He set to the task and soon had the bottom clear of all but a bit of water.

He then returned to the forward compartment and pulled a few pieces of fish out of the bag. He went back to the stern with the salted fish and a jar of water. Johanan looked up at the stars and adjusted his heading several times until he felt he was on the correct course. As Johanan chewed on the fish, he savored the sensation. Even his sense of taste was rejuvenated. The dried, salty fish contained flavors he hadn't experienced in years. He washed it down with a swig of the water. *Good Lord, it is wonderful to be young again!*

Stowed in a leather bag in the stern was a heavy, woolen cloak. It was soaked through and he did his best to wring water out of it

before spreading it out to dry. In the pocket of the cloak he found a small pouch with several Roman coins. Not a fortune by any means; maybe enough to pay for a meal and a night at an inn. As he fingered them, the profile of the Emperor Domitian glared back at him from one of the older coins.

My tormentor, long gone. Now I may outlast you by many years.

He set the pouch aside and spread the cloak out so it could dry in the warm night breeze.

Johanan continued to chew the leathery fish and ponder his future. The evening before, as he had watched the setting sun, his fate had seemed so clear. Johanan would soon fade away, surrounded by his own beloved disciples, and then rejoin his Lord in the promised Kingdom. But now his whole world was turned upside down. He never considered when Jesus had said to Peter, “If it is my will that he remain until I return, what is that to you?” that he would remain alive. Especially in the body of his youth! And if he was going to be here until the Lord’s return, how long would that be? Forty years? Maybe even a century? The church had anticipated the second coming of the Christos at any moment. Some rationalized the Lord’s comment to Peter indicated He would return when Johanan’s own life was running out. But this changed everything. He was a young man once again.

Johanan nodded in exhaustion. The excitement of making his escape, bailing out the boat, and thinking about his future were taking their toll. He looked around at the sea. The wind was steady and the waters fairly calm. He finished his meal, made another adjustment of the steering oar, and secured it with a rope. Then he pulled the damp cloak around him and with the experience of many nights and days spent napping on a boat, leaned back and dozed off.

Johanan slept for several hours before waking up. His initial thought was the whole experience had been a dream. Then he looked around

at the boat and at the youthful flesh on his arm. He settled back in for another hour or so sleep. This time when he woke, the sun was rising at his back and water was lapping at his feet. Johanan bailed the boat out again. Then he made another adjustment of the steering oar and retrieved some of the dates in the leather bag.

As he ate his breakfast he considered what to do next. He could join the community of believers in Athens and find lodging among them. He could help teach and spread the truth about the Christos. Many churches needed guidance from teachers to keep them on the path and away from rising heresies. Maybe it would be made clear to him through visions how long he would be waiting. But, in Johanan's experience, visions were infrequent. He would have to depend on the teaching and guidance he had received so far, God's grace, and his own frequently imperfect judgment to make his way. The prospects were exciting, and daunting. He ran his fingers over his scalp and through the curly hair covering what had been a bald pate the night before. He even pulled back the cloak to his knees to look at previously withered calves. They were now smooth and muscular, with no trace of the bulging, purplish veins that had plagued his old age.

He sipped the water. There were only a few small pots. Not enough water to last to mainland Greece. He'd need to stop and refill his containers at one of the many islands along the way.

Enough worrying about the future; he had first been a fisherman. And, he had done some of his best thinking while plying his trade. He pulled out a set of the nets and began to inspect the rough fibers. As he found tears, he mended them with the eye of experience and the nimble fingers of a young man. In short order, the net was serviceable. Johanan watched the water off both the port and starboard side of the boat. He could see infrequent silver flashes off of either side. He cast the net over the side and retrieved it. Nothing. He cast again and this time several good sized fish came up with the net. He continued for several hours until he had filled the bot-

tom of the boat with a modest catch. The weight of the fish made his vessel ride more deeply in the waves, giving it some stability. The sun was now high overhead and the wind gusted, still at his back, driving him toward the Greek mainland. The prevailing wind would usually oppose him as he headed west. God appeared to be blessing his journey.

Johanan pulled out the cooking brazier and replenished it with the now dry charcoal. He found a dull knife in the forward compartment along with a sharpening stone. The apostle worked the knife against the stone until it was sharp enough for cleaning a fish. He selected a good sized specimen and gutted it, throwing the entrails overboard. With a bit of work he managed to get a small fire going in the charcoal brazier with his cloak serving as protection from the wind. A small reed served as a spit for the fish and he held it over the coals, feeding in fresh pieces of charcoal as needed to keep the fire going. Johanan turned it, too frequently he soon found. He had grown in patience as he grew older but now it seemed the impetuosity of his youth had returned. He consciously forced himself to turn the spit less often. Soon it was done and he was eating his meal out of the bailing bowl using the tip of the knife.

In the late afternoon he spied a sandy shore on what appeared to be an uninhabited island. He beached his boat and secured it to a rock above the high tide line. The exertion of pulling the boat up onto the sand left him exhausted, but exhilarated. After a short rest he scouted the area and found a small creek where he refilled his water jugs. He built a small fire and slept near it, rolled up in his cloak.

Johanan spent the next several weeks working his way toward Athens. He knew various islands and the mainland blocked the direct route to the ancient Greek city and had turned to the southwest to bypass them. When the weather was clear and it looked like he was in an open stretch of water he would spend the night at sea, sleeping in short snatches and watching the stars to adjust

his course. Other nights he would find an uninhabited coast with a creek to refill his water pots and spend the night ashore. He spent one stretch of several days ashore on a remote beach cleaning and drying a large catch of fish that he hoped to use for trade.

One evening, during what he expected was the midway point of his journey, Johanan bailed out the boat right before he settled in for a short nap. It had always needed regular bailing but it seemed like it was taking on water faster. He passed another night on the boat, sleeping in short stretches. When the sun finally rose, Johanan noticed his sandals were again in standing water. He bailed all the water out, and then cast his nets. In short order he had pulled in a good catch.

Soon he was up to his ankles in water. It seemed like more water than would normally be pulled in as part of his fishing. He started to inspect the hull, pushing aside fish to get a good look at the planking. Up toward the bow he found a discolored spot on the wood. He pressed gently on it. It was soft. *Wood worms!* Any attempt to repair it at sea might be disastrous. He could push through the soft planks and the sea would gush in, and his fragile vessel would slip beneath the waves. Could his new life end so soon?

He spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon looking for a suitable place to land. Finally, he saw an island to the left, near the horizon, and made a course toward it. As he got closer he could see several plumes of smoke. Soon Johanan saw a wide beach with several small vessels pulled up onto the sand. The shoreline stretched from the sea up to a dozen dwellings on higher ground. The buildings were made of stone and wood, and looked to be in good repair. Most had fish drying on racks on the roof or out front. As Johanan grew closer, several children playing on the shore spotted him and alerted the adults. He steered toward the beach and soon four men waded into the water to help pull him up onto the sand. They seemed friendly enough, but you could never tell. They

might be getting ready to rob him and toss his body into the ocean for scavengers.

“Greetings, stranger,” a gray bearded man said, in Greek. His sparkling blue eyes looked straight into Johanan’s, almost as if he was discerning his deepest secrets. He grasped Johanan’s forearm and helped him out of the boat onto the shore. “What brings you to our island?”

Reassured by his manner Johanan said, “I’m traveling from the mainland to the east to Athens. I hoped I might be able to trade my catch for some repairs and supplies.”

The men looked into the bottom of the boat at the silvery cargo, and then at each other. They nodded. “A very good catch,” the gray-beard said. “Stay awhile and tell us of your travels. We don’t have many visitors to our island. You may stay in my home until you’re ready to continue your journey.”

Johanan and the men pulled his boat high up on the sand. Soon he was working alongside them to patch the other boats, using pitch collected from trees on the island and bitumen bought in trade. As the men worked, they talked of bits of news from Rome, Corinth, Alexandria and other cities. He learned the Romans didn’t bother the island much. A tax collector would stop by occasionally, but they had never suffered an occupation or persecution at the hands of the empire. Johanan entertained them with stories and news brought by travelers to Ephesus, which was on a major Roman trade route.

As they worked, Johanan noticed he was drawing attention from the other villagers. As women, in the course of their daily work, passed the men on the beach, their glances at the stranger seemed to linger. Children playing in the vicinity seemed to congregate around Johanan. The graybeard finally shooed them away. It appeared visitors were a welcome novelty.

Johanan managed to determine from discussions about the island that he had strayed farther south than planned. This location was off the more direct route to Athens he thought he was steering.

When they turned to patch his boat the men admired it and started to ask questions.

“This is a fine vessel, but small for such a long voyage with one man,” a tall villager said.

“Yes,” Johanan said. “It is small, but I have many years of experience sailing.”

“Many years?” the graybeard laughed. “You look to be only barely out of your twenties!”

Johanan hesitated. He was going to have to think before he spoke more. “Maybe it only seems like many years, Father. But I started young and learned at the feet of wise men like you.”

A stocky man scowled at Johanan. The apostle noted that although the top of this man’s head was bald, his facial hair was composed of curls so thick it reminded him of the snakes in the legend of Medusa. He half expected the beard to come to life. The man asked, “How did you come by such a boat?”

Johanan pondered the question briefly. “My master gave it to me. He has sent me on an errand.”

“What kind of errand?”

The graybeard pounded the stocky man on the back. “Enough questions. Let him save some stories for tonight.

On the hull of Johanan’s boat, they cut out two sections of planks infested with wood worms. The greybeard had his son fetch several pieces of wood to replace the section. He skillfully cut them to fit the gap and inserted them. A brace on the inside secured with wooden pegs made the patch permanent. A coating of pitch and bitumen completed the repair.

At that moment, a young man carrying a wooden bucket walked up to the boat. Water was dripping from his dark hair and beard. He held up the pail for their inspection. “Look what I caught for dinner tonight.” Johanan peered into it. The contents of the water filled bucket, roiled. A mottled skin broke the surface. Two tentacles reached up and over the side.

The young man reached in and pulled out an octopus. He grasped it at the base of the slimy body. The tentacles thrashed in the air and entwined themselves around his forearm. He smiled broadly. "A special treat for dinner tonight, in honor of our guest." He dropped it back into the pail.

Johanán stepped back. His Jewish stomach wanted to wretch. He wanted to say it was one of the most disgusting things he had ever seen. Instead, he said, "I am honored, I think."

The graybeard laughed loudly, and pounded Johanán on the back. "Enough work. Time to eat."

That night the villagers put together an impromptu feast at the community fire pit near the beach. Johanán contributed a dozen fish from his catch, and they were soon cooking alongside a goat and a small pig. Despite being freed from the restrictions on pork in the early days of the church, the smell of the meat still made Johanán queasy.

The graybeard formally introduced himself as Tullius, the leader of the small community. He then presented his family. Thais, his wife, carried herself as if she were a benevolent queen, rather than the wife of the headman on an out of the way island. Silver strands accented her rich brown hair. Her kindly smile was accented by crinkles at the corners of her deep brown eyes. If you replaced her plain, but neat, tunic with a white toga, she would meld neatly with the Roman aristocracy.

Tullius' older son, Aprius, who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, had missed Johanán's arrival because he was out hunting. His youngest son, Marcus, looked to be in his late teens. He had helped Johanán patch his boat earlier on the beach. The sons of Tullius looked like they were cut out of the same cloth as their father. The three men had dark, curly hair. Aprius' beard was charcoal black and

thick. Marcus beard was lighter, and still bare in patches. Neither of the fit young men sported the slight paunch their father wore.

The daughter, Anteia, was about two decades of age. She blushed when introduced to Johanan. She was a lovely girl with long, light brown hair, bleached almost blonde by the sun. She was of marrying age, even a few years beyond it. She displayed the regal look of her mother, and the bright blue eyes of her father. *A remarkable beauty*, thought Johanan.

Tullius escorted Johanan to a seat of honor at the head of the pavilion. Baskets of local fruits, vegetables, and hard breads were passed around. Johanan took samples of each, as several were unfamiliar. Platters of goat, pork and fish also made the rounds. Johanan hesitated at the pork. Tullius noticed his reluctance.

“You do not like pig?” he asked.

“I don’t eat it often,” he said. “It is not common among my people.”

“Try some of this on it,” Tullius said, as he passed a clay pot with a wooden spoon. “It is a special recipe of *garum*, passed down from my grandfather.”

Johanan sniffed the *garum*, or fish sauce, that was a common condiment throughout the empire. This one didn’t smell nearly as strong as ones he had tasted before. He ladled some of the dark, honey colored liquid onto his pork and took a bite.

“This is very good,” he exclaimed. “The best *garum* I’ve ever tasted! I might even get to like pig flesh if I can have this on it.”

Tullius laughed his hearty laugh. “Pass the pork back to Johanan.”

The village leader was in a good mood and soon he had a large clay amphora containing wine brought out. Two men stuck the pointed bottom of the vessel into the sand. Tullius used a wooden dipper to fill several goblets and passed them out to the elder men of the village. Johanan noticed the goblets in the hands of the islanders ranged from plain wood or clay, to metal with intricate designs.

Tullius turned over the wine steward duties to Aprius and brought Johanan a glass goblet.

“This is from Syria. It is made with a new process.”

Johanan marveled at the wine glass. He had never seen anything like it. Usually drinking vessels like this were made of strands of glass laid on top of each other like a coiled rope. This looked almost as if it had been cast.

“The trader who sold it to me tells me it is made by blowing into the molten glass and twirling it. Be careful. It is very expensive.”

He admired the container. “It is truly a privilege to be entrusted with such a rare object, and one of such beauty.” Johanan sipped from the glass at first and then drank more deeply. The wine had a sweet taste and went down easily.

Then, a platter was set before Johanan. The young man who had caught the octopus smiled at him. “For our guest, a special treat.” Johanan stared at the mix of roasted tentacles and flesh. The mottled pattern was still visible on the cooked carcass.

“My friend,” Johanan hesitated. “You honor me, but I tell you, there is not enough garum on this whole island to make me eat that.”

The islanders broke out in laughter. “Julius,” said Tullius. “Pass it to me. I’ll take Johanan’s share.” It only took a few moments for the crowd to clear the platter. Johanan had to turn his head. He couldn’t imagine ever eating the thing he had seen reach its tentacles out of the bucket.

“And now, before our visitor tells us his story,” Tullius said, “we will entertain him with our athletic feats. First, boys to the beach.” He led a dozen boys in their early to mid-teens down to the beach. One of them drew a line perpendicular to the shore and they all gathered behind it.

“The first one around the tree on the point and back is the winner.” He pointed to a gnarled old tree on a point of land far down the beach. They all nodded.

Johanan approached the group. “If I may,” he said, “a prize for

the winner?” He pulled out the smallest of the Roman coins in his pouch, held it up, and passed it to Tullius.

“Most generous,” Tullius said as he turned the coin over. Then he held it aloft over the boys and said, “To the winner. But for such a prize the race will be two laps.”

The boys lined up and began to chatter, each determined to take home honor, and the coin. At Tullius’ signal, they begin the sprint down the beach to the tree, cheered on by their family and friends.

At the end of the first lap, a group of five in a tight pack led, the others trailing behind. Goaded on by the crowd, they made the turn and pushed themselves even harder. When they finally sprinted up the beach to the finish line, one of the oldest crossed the finish line only a few paces ahead of the runner up, with the others trailing well behind.

“Well done, Dagon,” Tullius said, as he presented him with the worn coin. Dagon bowed to Johanan and then waded into the surf to cool himself off. He was soon joined by his fellow runners and their joyful chatter filled the evening air.

The rest of the villagers retired back to the community fire pit where Tullius soon called for the next round of entertainment. “Aprius, Proitos, in the ring.” Proitos was a good-natured man who had labored alongside Johanan earlier that day. Both men were in their mid to early twenties, and in excellent shape from the hard work of survival on the island and the sea.

The pair grappled in the center of a hastily drawn ring in the sand. It was soon clear that although Proitos was bigger and more heavily muscled, Aprius was the more skilled at the art of wrestling. Proitos rushed Aprius several times and missed his target as the smaller man stepped aside and laughed. Proitos made mock threats veiled behind a smile. But his face was getting redder as he was frustrated by the skill of Aprius. Finally Aprius tired of toying with his opponent and took advantage of a charge by his bigger friend. In one swift move he hooked his arm under Proitos’ armpit, leaned his

back against the big man's abdomen, and flipped him up and over onto the sand.

"Well done, my son," Tullius said proudly. The villagers joined in the cheering as the victor grabbed the arm of the vanquished and helped him to his feet.

"Julius, Agon, your turn," and the next two men took their turn. Julius was the octopus catcher, Agon his younger brother. This pair were more evenly matched in skill and strength. Large young men, they grunted and groaned as they tried to best each other with brute strength. Finally Agon outlasted his older brother and threw him to the sand.

After a short rest period, the last match paired Aprius and Agon against each other. Agon was wary, and stayed just out Aprius' reach. Finally, Aprius taunted him, "If you won't wrestle me, maybe your sister would represent your family in a match." Aprius gazed at a dark haired beauty, sitting next to his own sister, Anteia. He smiled broadly at her. The villagers hooted and hollered in appreciation.

With Aprius' attention on the young woman, Agon saw his chance. He stepped forward with his arms ready to encircle the smaller man. His gaze seemingly still on the young woman, Aprius sidestepped Agon's charge and grabbed the inside of his arm. He stepped back and jerked to pull him off balance, then pushed him on his back to the sand.

"I guess the match with your sister will have to wait." The villagers laughed and cheered Aprius' victory. He pulled Agon to his feet and they pounded each other on the shoulders.

Agon returned to his seat, but Aprius stood in the center of the ring. He looked at Johanan and said, "Would our friend care to take on the village champion?"

He caught himself as he almost said, "You would wrestle an old man?" Instead he slowly pulled himself to his feet, faced the fisherman and said, "I would be honored."

Johanan enjoyed physical activity but it had been many years

since he had been able to do anything more strenuous than a short walk. He entered the ring and shuffled warily around Aprius. The two were about the same size and the contest seemed to be fair in terms of size and strength.

“Don’t worry stranger—I won’t hurt you,” Aprius said. “We still need to hear your story.”

Johanen grinned and said, “Are we here to talk or wrestle?” With that, he stepped in and grabbed Aprius around the waist. He had expected him to sidestep the move but the islander stood his ground as if he was testing Johanen’s strength. They grappled and grunted much as the two brothers had done earlier. Johanen was reveling just in being able to physically expert himself in a contest again.

Finally, Aprius seemed to tire of the match and managed to flip Johanen over on his back with a swift side move. True to his word, he had been gentle.

“You are a worthy opponent,” he said graciously as he helped him to his feet. Johanen knew otherwise, but nodded.

Tullius ordered up another round of wine as the villagers congratulated both wrestlers on a fine match. After a few minutes, the conversation died down. Almost as if on cue, they looked at Johanen.

Then Tullius asked, “So our new friend, what brings you to our island and takes you to Athens?”

Johanen sat up from his reclining position and sipped his wine to buy some time. Where to start? What to say?

Chapter Four

We are called to be fishers of men, not hunters of men.

Kevin Mather, President, Seattle Mariners



K*ER-POCK, KER-POCK.* THE crescendo on the racquetball court rose to a climax as Scott and John battled for the point. The match stood at one game apiece. They had traded the lead five times in this final round. After several volleys, John blasted it past the lanky twenty-five-year-old for the point.

As he stood bouncing the ball, getting ready to serve, John asked, “So, where did you get the money for your fancy new Mustang?”

“Credit man, credit. But it will be worth it. You should see how the girls turn their heads when I pass by with the top down.”

John grunted, then fired the ball at just the right angle to bounce it over Scott’s reach. To his surprise, Scott leapt up and smacked it. John made a halfhearted attempt to return the ball and missed it.

Scott shot him a big grin. “My serve. Match point.” Scott held

the ball in his right hand, and squeezed it several times, like he was trying to force it to accept his will.

He looked over at John. “Man, you were something last week. Disarming that dude and saving the girl like you were some superhero.” He bounced the ball on the floor. “Where did you learn to fight like that? Some karate dojo?”

John looked away from Scott and gazed at the wall in front of them. “When I was much younger I lived on an island in the Mediterranean. My friends there taught me the basics.” He glanced over at Scott, then back at the wall. He crouched down, ready to return Scott’s serve. “Gets me out of a jam once in a while.”

Scott faced John and moved into a fighting stance. “You gotta teach me some of that. Ready for first lesson, Master Amato.”

John waved him off. In his best imitation of Yoda, he said. “Ah, young Scott, for good only is the force. For your own purposes you might use it.”

Scott laughed. “Good one.” He served with a powerful overhand. They fought for what seemed like several minutes. Finally, John fed his neighbor an easy lob. He was ready for the game to be over, and was going to let Scott have the win. Scott took the gift and put all his muscle behind it. The ball raced straight toward John’s face. He jerked his head to the left and it whizzed by his ear.

“Dude, I win.” Scott ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair. He rubbed his sweaty forehead on the sleeve of his t-shirt. “That was one tough game.”

John bent over, panting from the exertion. He was a good five inches shorter than the six foot three inch Scott. Keeping up with his taller friend was hard work.

Scott crossed the court and bumped fists with John. “Not bad, old man. Not bad.”

They left the court and headed to the locker room. “Hey,” Scott said, “I’m going to take a rain check on that beer. I’m meeting up with some buds downtown.”

“No worries. I’ve been thinking about paying a visit to someone anyhow.”

“You’re still buying next time.” He grabbed a towel from a rack and rubbed it over his face. “Hey, you could come tonight with us and get the tab.”

John shook his head. “I’ll pass. I’ve got an early appointment tomorrow. Besides, I can’t handle staying out all night like you and your friends.”

Scott laughed. “Hey, you’re only about thirty, thirty-five, right? You could if you wanted to.”

“If I wanted to.”

“You really are one of the straightest arrows I know. You should loosen up sometime.”

“Don’t think I’m perfect. I’ve even been known to subconsciously whistle a ribald ditty popular with Napoleon’s light cavalry.”

Scott looked at him as if he’d beamed in from another planet. “Whaaa? Every time I think you’re a normal dude you say something weird like that.”

They stopped to get a drink from the cooler outside the locker room. As John sipped the chilled water from a paper cup, Scott playfully punched him in the shoulder. “Seriously, you were something with that mugger.”

John drained his cup, crumpled it, and ricocheted it off the wall and into the trashcan. “Teach you I can, young Scott. But about the Force, first you must learn.” He turned and entered the locker room.

After a quick shower, John pulled a bronze, Greek style cross off the top shelf of his locker. For a moment he gazed at the pitted surface and corners worn nearly round. Because the symbol was heavy and awkward, he took it off when playing an active sport. He slipped it on over his head and donned his shirt.

He stepped over to the mirror and stood next to Scott. John

ran a comb through his curly black hair and his grooming was done. Meanwhile, Scott worked gel into his hair, teasing each lock into place. He combed the hair down the center of his scalp into a ridge in the fauxhawk style, trying to get just the right look. John wanted to tell him he looked like he was wearing a crested Roman Centurion's helmet. He held his tongue, but gave him a smirk.

Scott looked over at John and grinned. "Got to look good for the ladies."

John gave him a faint smile in response. "Go easy on the ladies, bud. Go easy."

He pointed down at John's ankle. "What happened to the nasty cut from that dude's knife? I thought you were going to need some serious stitches."

John glanced down at his left ankle. All that remained of the gash from the knife was a barely visible scar. Within a few days, even it would be gone.

John put his foot up on the counter and ran his finger over where the wound had been. "I heal quickly."

Scott turned back to the mirror. John slung his jacket over his shoulder and left the locker room.

As he walked through the gym, he noticed five women on treadmills. They all sported ponytails that swayed to different beats as they walked, jogged, or ran. John slowed his pace, mesmerized by the sight. For a single beat, their flaxen pendulums swung together, before separating once again into individual rhythms.

A toffee colored ponytail at the far end flicked away as the young woman turned to meet John's gaze. The athletically built woman with a small nose flashed a shy smile before averting her eyes. John responded with a look of embarrassment at being caught watching. She glanced back up at him again before returning her attention to the iPad on the stand in front of her. John picked up his pace as he headed toward the lobby of the gym. Just before he turned the corner, he glanced back over his shoulder at the row

of treadmills. The toffee haired woman at the end was watching him from behind. He gave her an amused look. She blushed, and turned back to her reading.

Thirty minutes later, John sat down in a cheap plastic chair at a visitor's station in the King County jail. The clock on the wall read a quarter to six. An inch of Plexiglas separated him from the room where prisoners came and went from appointments with family members, friends or their attorneys. The seat across from John was still empty. To his right, a woman chattered away in Mexican Spanish with a man, connected by a telephone handset. From her side of the conversation, it sounded like the man had been brought in for domestic violence. She seemed to be alternating between wanting him back, and being afraid of what he would do to her if he was released. Out of the corner of his eye, John watched the man. He grunted occasionally, but said very little. John noticed he clenched and unclenched his jaw as he listened to the woman.

His observation of the drama was interrupted when a guard led an orange jump-suited inmate to the plastic chair across from John. He pushed him down into the seat and held up his right hand to John with all five digits extended and mouthed, "Five minutes." John nodded and picked up the phone.

The young man across from John squinted at him and then jerked his head back in surprise. The same look of fear John had seen through the eyeholes in the ski mask spread across his face. John smiled reassuringly, and pointed at the phone.

He finally leaned forward and picked up the phone on his side. John noticed he used his left hand to pick up the phone. His right wrist was bandaged. "Hey, you're the guy who stopped me last week."

"Yeah. That was me."

“What are you...” He left his sentence unfinished, as he stared at John.

“Seth, I’m here to give you a chance.” John glanced down at some notes in front of him. “They tell me this is your first arrest.” He looked up and noticed that Seth’s left eye was twitching. As John watched, he wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jumpsuit. “They also tell me you’re a meth user.”

He glanced over John’s shoulder, and then down at the desk in front of him.

“Seth, when I looked into your face last week, I saw fear. I could tell you’re not some career criminal—at least you aren’t yet.”

Seth looked into John’s eyes; he seemed to be eager for some measure of reassurance.

“I can give you a shot at getting clean if you let me.”

He scowled at John. “Who says I need help?”

John shook his head. “The choice is yours.” He waved at the room behind Seth. “You can live in fabulous places like this, or go straight and get your life together.”

Seth scowled again. “Do you do this to everyone you beat up?”

“No, just the ones I think have a chance.” John leaned forward. “I’ll be very honest with you. It won’t be easy. The success rate for kicking a meth addiction is very slim. But otherwise you can expect to end up on the streets—dead.” He leaned back, and waited.

Seth sat in silence for a few moments. “What’s the deal?”

“I handle your bail, and the court releases you to a treatment program run by the local Men’s Mission.”

“Men’s Mission? Is that like a place for homeless guys?”

“Yes, and they also run a treatment program for drug and alcohol addicts.” John leaned forward. “The director is a friend of mine. He’s already agreed to take you in.”

Seth wiped his nose again, then looked up at the ceiling for

a few moments. Finally he said, "What about the charges against me?" He stared down at the counter in front of him.

"Most likely you'll still go to trial, or cop a plea. But things will go better for you if you're trying to get your life together."

Seth looked back up at John. "What about the girl? Is she okay?" The flash of fear on his face was replaced by a look of pleading.

"She'll be okay."

"I wouldn't have hurt her, you know."

"I hope not. I think you were so drugged up at the time that things could have gone very wrong."

Seth looked away again. "She's not from here, is she?"

"No, she's here from Rio on a fellowship program at the University of Washington. Leaves for home in a few weeks." John rapped his knuckles on the counter in front of him. "Not exactly the way to end her year in America, but she'll be okay."

Seth looked back up, relief washing across his face. John noticed the guard glance down at his watch, and then start across the room toward Seth. "What do you say, Seth? Take a shot at getting your life together, or this and worse?" He waved his hand again at their surroundings.

"I don't know. I've never been much for religion."

John nodded. "Neither am I."

Seth gave him a quizzical look. Before John could reply, the guard tapped on Seth's shoulder. He jerked his head and pulled the phone away from his face. He looked back at the guard. They had a short interchange, and Seth turned back to John. "Tell me something. Why are you doing this? Are you some kind of lawyer?"

John nodded, and smiled. "I'm in the business of helping people. I can tell you more, later."

Seth shook his head. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. This is just too freaky." Again, he rubbed his nose on the sleeve of his orange jump suit.

John frowned. "Okay, but don't take too long." He pointed to Seth's bandaged right wrist. "Sorry I hurt you. I was afraid things were getting out of hand."

Seth looked down at the wrist, and stroked the bandage. "I'll be okay I guess." He looked down at the counter in front of him. "Can't blame you for trying to protect her."

The guard gripped Seth's shoulder. John hung up his phone. As he turned to leave, he glanced at the woman still chattering away in Spanish to the man behind the glass. The look on his face was of barely restrained anger. He suspected that if the glass hadn't separated them, the rage would have been released.

John stopped at the front desk where a formidable looking woman watched over the waiting room. He stopped and leaned over. "I don't mean to meddle, but I couldn't but overhear the couple next to me talking in Spanish and I speak the language a bit. Doesn't 'Me lío cuando salgo de aquí' mean something like, 'I will mess you up when I get out of here?'"

Anger washed over the guard's face. "Did you hear him say that to her?"

John shook his head. "I couldn't testify to that and I shouldn't get involved. But maybe she should know about local shelters before he's released." John turned on his heel and strode out before she could question him further.

As he turned the dials on the bike lock he had an uneasy feeling that he was being watched. He slowly straightened up and then quickly turned around to look behind him. A woman, with long blonde hair and dressed in a black form fitting outfit was forty yards away, standing at the corner of the King County Administration Building.

She was looking straight at him.

She stepped to her left and was hidden by the building. John

sprinted the short distance to where she had been standing and looked down the street.

Two county sheriff bicycle cops were standing on the sidewalk just around the corner, talking. When John appeared they broke off their conversation and gave him a wary look. John looked past them. No sign of the watcher.

“Excuse me officers. Did you just see a woman, dressed in black, long blonde hair come by here?”

One cop looked behind him and scanned the street. The other kept his eyes fixed on John. His companion turned back and shook his head. “No one has been by here in the last few minutes.”

The other cop slowly nodded. “You okay, sir?”

John gave him a weak smile. “My mistake.” He scanned the sidewalk and street beyond the pair and then said, “Sorry for bothering you.” He turned away and returned to his bike.

An hour later, John pulled up to the wrought iron fence that guarded the courtyard in front of his apartment building. Before he opened the gate he looked carefully around. No sign of the mysterious figure. The encounter still had him unsettled.

He lifted his bike by the top tube, and headed up the stairs to his third story apartment, bypassing the rickety elevator in the lobby. The evening air and the breeze from the bike ride had kept him cool while he was riding. Now, perspiration broke out on his forehead. As he climbed up to his floor, sweat trickled down his back.

When he reached his floor, he dropped the bike on the carpet and wheeled it up the hall. The click, click, click from the hub echoed off the bare walls. As he passed the third apartment in his hallway he heard an animal paw at the door. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the door open a crack. A furry, dark brown

cat raced past him. The feline stopped in front of John's door and looked up, purring. The door down the hall clicked as it closed.

"How's it going, Mocha?" John asked as he inserted the key in the lock. He pushed the door open and the cat raced inside, straight to the kitchen. The sound of munching soon emanated from a food dish. "Man, you'd think Sharon never feeds you the way you eat here." He parked the bike in the corner and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower.

After cleaning up, he sat down in front of the TV and picked up the remote. He turned on the ancient set, and after it warmed up, started flipping through the channels. The cat jumped up on the couch next to him and pushed its head into his lap. He started to scratch her behind the ears, and she purred so loud he could feel the vibration in his fingertips. "Good kitty, good Mocha." He set the remote down and scratched the cat on both sides of her face. She stared into his eyes for a moment, and then closed her eyes to resume her deep thrum of a purr. "Don't forget your mission, fuzz ball. Between you and me we'll get through to that wounded soul you live with." John continued to scratch her, until she pulled abruptly away, and jumped down off the sofa. She looked around the little apartment, then headed to the door, where she pawed furiously. He went over and opened the door. "That's right. Go show her some loving." He closed the door behind her and flipped the deadbolt closed.

He picked the remote up and continued scanning. He paused on different channels to catch a few local sports scores, national headlines, and then stopped when a familiar face filled the screen: Professor Wes Cavanaugh.

The camera cut to a raven haired reporter sitting on a chair opposite Cavanaugh. "We're back with Professor Wes Cavanaugh, a popular pundit on matters of religion." She turned toward him and flashed a brilliant smile. The white of her teeth contrasted with her tanned skin. "Professor, just before the break you were

telling us about John's nickname, 'the Son of Thunder.' What did that mean exactly?"

"Actually, he and his brother, James, were called 'Sons of Thunder.'" He leaned forward and grinned at the anchor. "The most popular theory is he and his brother had a bit of an anger management issue—thunder referring to their hot tempers."

She raised her eyebrow. "Not exactly what you'd expect from two apostles."

"True, but remember they were human just like you and I. There are other theories about the nickname, but the Bible doesn't really explain it. Personally, I like the hot temper theory."

John gritted his teeth.

"Professor, when is your new series on the apostle John scheduled to appear?"

"I just signed a contract with this network this morning, so you get to be the one to break the news. The series is scheduled to premiere in January."

Megan flashed Cavanaugh a flirtatious grin. "I understand this is fiction, but you were telling me there are many legends that support the idea of a living apostle John."

"That's true. Many people know John was exiled to Patmos where he wrote the Book of Revelation, but most don't know why he was exiled instead of being martyred."

"Why wasn't he just killed like the other apostles?"

"The Roman Emperor Domitian did attempt to execute John for his Christian faith. Sometime around the year 95 AD, Domitian had him brought to Rome and ordered him thrown into boiling oil for refusing to renounce his faith and worship the emperor."

The reporter wrinkled her nose and grimaced.

Cavanaugh laughed, reached over, and patted her on the hand. "Not to worry, Megan. He emerged from the pot unscathed, and made many converts. But Domitian exiled him to the quarries of Patmos to keep him out of the way. After the emperor's death,

John was freed and returned to Ephesus where he lived to be an old man.”

She leaned forward. “What about other legends?”

“One of the better documented ones involves Edward the Confessor, King of England, in 1042. Edward was accosted by a beggar asking for alms. The pious king took off his ring and gave it to the beggar.” Cavanaugh turned to speak directly into the camera before continuing.

You shameless ham. John glanced down at the parts of a disassembled cuckoo clock on the coffee table in front of him. He picked up one of the counterweights and began to squeeze it like it was an exercise ball. “Twenty-four years later, two English pilgrims were in Jerusalem when a man gave them a ring and told them to take it to the king with a message: That Edward would be joining the Lord in six months. When they asked the man for his name, he replied, ‘John the Apostle.’”

“John the Apostle?”

“Yes. The pilgrims reported back to Edward the Confessor. He recognized the ring he had given the beggar nearly a quarter century before. He prepared himself for his passing, fell sick on Christmas Eve, and died weeks later, on the feast of the three Kings.”

“That is fascinating, but tell me something.” She reached over and touched his forearm. “How would John have survived all these centuries? What would he be doing now?”

Cavanaugh started to open his mouth, but John had heard enough. He reared back to throw the counterweight in his hand at the screen. At the last instant, he thought better of it, and redirected his aim. The lead weight hit the wall at full force, and sunk halfway into the plaster, just above the television, one end pointing back at John. A puff of white dust emanated from the wall and settled slowly on the fake wood grain of the TV cabinet.

Chapter Five

Jesus was not a theologian. He was God who told stories.

Madeleine L'Engele



“SO OUR NEW friend, what brings you to our island on your way to Athens?” Tullius repeated the question from his position at the head of the pavilion. The villagers looked at Johanan, expectantly.

He paused. He was used to being the Beloved Disciple, the apostle and the companion of Jesus. He spoke to his audiences with the authority of one who had walked with the Christos. But he had been commanded to keep his identity a secret.

“My new friends, I travel from Asia Minor to Athens. I must admit I’m only here because my navigational skills aren’t as good as I thought they were. Otherwise I would have passed far to the north of your beautiful island.”

Tullius laughed loudly and stood with his cup outstretched. “To the poor navigational skills that brought our new friend to our home,” he said.

The other villagers enthusiastically joined him. Some scrambled to refill their wine glasses so they could properly toast Johanan's error. It took several minutes before the hubbub died down and they again turned their attention to him.

"I travel to Athens to bring a message." He paused and slowly scanned the entire group, letting the anticipation build.

"A message of the love the true God has for all his people, including you my friends."

The villagers looked at each other and then back at Johanan. From their expressions, this was certainly not what they expected. Travelers usually brought tales of their own adventures. Most tried to impress the locals with their accomplishments—at least those travelers that weren't Roman tax collectors.

"And how do you come to bear this message?" asked Aprius, his recent opponent in the ring.

Johanan smiled at him. "I come from a community of followers of the Son of God." Again he paused for effect.

"The Son came to Earth a century ago and lived as one of us for over thirty years. Then He was sacrificed for our sins by the Romans—but rose from the dead after three days. Now He reigns in Heaven with his Father."

Aprius looked at Johanan with intensity. "Did you see this Son of God?"

How was he going to handle this question? Finally, he said, "He died and rose from the dead over seventy years ago, my friend. Do I look old enough to have walked with Him?"

"No," Aprius said. Then he pointed to Tullius, "But maybe my father..."

The villagers laughed at Tullius who raised his cup to them.

Aprius waited until the laughter died down and said, "Tell us more of the Son."

Johanan started, "In the beginning..."

Several hours later he finished with the story of the ascen-

sion. He had told of Christ's birth, ministry, and miracles. He had openly wept during his description of the crucifixion and laughed with joy when describing the resurrection. During his discourse he had seen a variety of expressions on the face of his audience. Some enraptured, some quizzical, a few disapproving. Some wept along with him.

"Remember," he concluded, "God loves the world and his people so much, that he sent his Son to live among us, to teach of his love, and to serve as a sacrifice for our sins. And then to rise again to show He is God and not even death can conquer Him. Anyone who believes in Him will join Him in Heaven where they will have everlasting life."

Side conversations began to break out among the islanders. Then questions began to pop out—some directed to him—others to the crowd in general:

"Where is he now?"

"Should we worship him?"

"But what about our gods?"

"How can we know this is true?"

The stocky, balding man with the Medusa-like beard stood. He raised his staff to gain the attention of the villagers. Johanan had noticed him during the evening. As Johanan had talked, the man's expression had progressed from quizzical to disapproving.

He waved the staff at Johanan, then addressed the villagers. "We serve the gods of our Greek ancestors. They have served our people well for untold generations." He turned his attention back to Johanan and pointed the staff to him. "When we have turned to other gods, it has been disastrous. Remember when—"

"Enough." Tullius stood up. He addressed the village in his booming voice. "Johanan has given us much to think about. But a fisherman's day begins early. Let me suggest we invite him to stay with us and tell us more of this Son of God."

The stocky man shouted. "What about—"

Tullius raised his hand to silence him. "Solon, I know what you are going to say." He lowered his hand. "But before I make a decision, I would like to hear more for myself." He looked at Johanan.

"I would be glad to stay with you and tell you of Jesus. As long as you permit me to earn my keep by letting me labor alongside you."

"We can always use another strong back on our island. You are welcome to stay as my personal guest."

Solon glared at Johanan. Then he turned abruptly and strode out of the pavilion. With each step, he thrust the end of his staff into the sand as if he were spearing a wild boar.

The islanders began to disperse. Knots of animated conversations faded into the darkness. Torches carried by individual families dimmed as they retired to their homes. Johanan followed Tullius, his wife, and children, to the largest house in the village, situated at the southernmost end of the row of huts.

Aprius walked at his side. "Johanan, is this all true?"

"Yes my friend. It is the most wonderful truth."

"You tell of it as if you were there. But you say it was seven decades ago."

Johanan measured his words carefully. "In the community where I lived, there was a man who walked with Jesus. There are many still alive today who were taught by those who walked with him. They have been taught by reliable eyewitnesses. It is all true."

Marcus said, "I don't know about this. I think there are too many gods already."

Aprius clapped him on his back. "The way you primp in that mirror, maybe you think you should be a god."

Anteia giggled. "It is his prize possession."

Johanan raised an eyebrow.

Aprius laughed. "My little brother saved his money to buy a bronze hand mirror from a passing trader. He's never far from it."

Thais said, "Aprius. Leave your brother alone."

Aprius sighed and rolled his eyes. "Of course, mother."

They reached the home and entered through a wooden gate into a small courtyard. A flock of chickens scattered as they came in. A half dozen bleating goats came up, hoping for some hand-outs. Two walls of the courtyard were made up of wooden poles about the height of a man. The third was the main family living quarters. Thais led Anteia into the family quarters. Tullius followed them and returned with a lamp. He led Aprius, his younger brother Marcus, and Johanan to a stable, the fourth wall of the courtyard. They went inside and were greeted by the bleating of several more goats. A medium size black dog with a gray muzzle was sleeping. He woke, looked up at them and went back to sleep. Tullius bent over and scratched him behind his ears.

"Sometimes I'm still surprised to see you are with us, Mithridates," he said to the old dog. He looked up at Johanan. In the lamplight, he could see Tullius' eyes were moist. "For many years he followed me everywhere faithfully. He waited for our boats to return from fishing at the edge of the beach. No matter how bad the weather, he was there. Now he is old and deaf and sleeps away the days." He stroked him again. "Someday I will be like him."

Aprius laughed. "Shall we make you a couch so you can wait for us on the beach, tomorrow?"

Tullius grabbed the young man around the neck. "You I will drown in the sea before I grow old and weak!"

They wrestled playfully for a few moments before Aprius graciously surrendered to his father. Tullius then picked up a blanket and a straw mat and gave them to Johanan. He led him outside to a ladder leaning up against the side of the stable. Aprius and Marcus were already climbing up to the roof. Tullius pointed up.

"There is some hay to sleep on and a tent for shelter from rains. It should be comfortable. Don't let my sons keep you awake too long."

Johanen grasped Tullius' arm. "Thank you for your hospitality. God bless you."

Tullius looked into his eyes. "I expect that with your visit, he already has."

He waited until Johanen was up the ladder and then went into the main house with his lamp.

When Johanen got to the top, he could see Marcus and Aprius in a three sided tent on the roof. Marcus had his back turned and was already asleep. Aprius was propped up on his elbow, waiting for him.

After Johanen laid out his mat and settled in for the night Aprius asked, "All you said was true? You swear by Poseidon?"

"Aprius, all I tell you is true and I will tell you more in the days to come, but I will not swear by Poseidon. I swear by the living God himself."



The next morning the sun was just up when Tullius entered the courtyard and yelled, "Up you laggards. The fish are already scheming on ways to escape our nets."

His sons tumbled out of bed and scrambled down the ladder. They knew an early start might be the difference between full nets and a meager catch. Johanen took a moment to take stock of his surroundings. Was it a dream? Wasn't he an old man? He looked over the edge of the loft and down at Tullius. It was no dream.

"Come, Johanen. You asked for a chance to earn your keep."

He climbed down the ladder, a little more cautiously than the boys who had been doing this for years.

"Sometimes we get up early and have a hot meal before setting out for the day's work." He held up a bag. "But you kept us up so late last night that you're going to sail with just dried fish and fruit."

"I hope it was worth the late night," questioned Johanen.

“I expect you’ll hear much about it today. And I look forward to hearing more tonight. I must admit your tale seems incredible.”

“Tullius, it is incredible. But I swear to you it’s all true.”

“In my youth I went to the mainland for my education. I remember meeting a group of people who reminded me of my home here on the island. They seemed to love each other and those around them very much. I found out later they were followers of your Christos.”

“How did you find out?”

Tullius looked down at the sand, then back at Johanan. “They were hauled away by legionaries for refusing to worship the emperor.”

Johanan nodded. “We have faced many persecutions, especially under Nero and most recently Domitian. It is not so bad nowadays under Trajan. We often worship in secret. Yet, our numbers grow because even the power of the Empire can’t stop the truth.”

“It does have the ring of truth to me. We stayed awake in the house for talking about it and have many questions. Thais fears incurring the wrath of the Romans.”

They had completed the short walk to the beach. Marcus, Aprius, and another man about the age of Aprius were preparing a small boat and pushing it into the water. Tullius passed a bag to Johanan.

“Today you fish with Aprius and his crew. They’ll tell me if you can really earn your keep.”

“I expect they will be fair judges,” He held the bag out at arm’s length, “especially because I have the day’s provisions.” Johanan shook it and they laughed.

“By all means, come aboard, man.” Marcus waved Johanan forward. “I’m ready to chew off my brother’s arm if there isn’t enough food in that sack.”

Johanan waded through the surf and jumped aboard the boat.

He stowed the provisions in a compartment up front and grabbed an oar. Aprius sat at the stern with the steering oar in his hand. Marcus pushed the boat deeper into the surf and pulled himself deftly up and over the rail. Their companion grasped the other oar and soon he and Johanan were back paddling into deeper water. When they were deep enough, Aprius commanded them to turn starboard and Johanan switched to a forward stroke while his companion continued to back stroke. Soon they were turned into the surf and Aprius ordered them to go forward. The two were soon pulling in unison and moving the boat steadily out to sea.

Johanan glanced up at the bow and saw Marcus looking at himself in a bronze hand mirror. He was carefully grooming his beard using a wooden comb. Johanan looked back at the stern. Aprius gave him a knowing glance.

“I told you about the mirror.” He smirked and yelled at Marcus. “Hey, Narcissus. How about getting the sail ready? You’ll have plenty of time to make yourself pretty for the girls before we head back.”

Johanan glanced back at Marcus. He gave Johanan a sheepish grin as he tucked the mirror away into a pouch.

Johanan looked back at the shore and saw several boats just hitting the water. Toward his right he saw several others in the sea, but none much farther than theirs. Evidently everyone was getting a late start this morning. He looked over at his rowing companion. Johanan recognized him as one of the young men around the fire last night. He had been sitting next to Aprius and the pair had seemed to be friends. But his expression through Johanan’s discourse was more one of questioning rather than open acceptance.

His fellow oarsman looked back. “My name is Nikias. It will be good to spend the day with our honored guest.”

“The honor is mine, Nikias. Your village has been very gracious.” At least he was friendly.

Soon enough they were beyond the surf and Marcus set the

sail. Aprius steered them along with the rest of the fleet toward a good fishing area. Marcus fetched their breakfast and passed the bag to Johanan. He looked in and pulled out the choicest piece of dried fish and gave it to Nikias. He pulled another fish out for himself and began to chew.

The day was clear and the wind light. They were making good time.

“So, Johanan, have you spent much time fishing?” asked Marcus.

“I didn’t buy the catch I brought to your village yesterday,” Johanan said. “I made my living on my father’s fishing boat for many years.”

“Where was that?” asked Nikias.

“The Sea of Galilee. Not as big as your sea of course. But we had our struggles with storms and bad days of fishing.”

“Why did you give it up?” asked Marcus.

He hesitated. He couldn’t tell them Jesus himself had called him. But he could tell them part of the truth.

“I decided to become a follower of Jesus. And spread his word to all people.”

Nikias interrupted. “My father is Solon.”

Johanan looked into Nikias eyes, trying to divine his intentions. “Solon, the man who warned against my teachings last night?”

Nikias nodded. “He and many of the village elders teach Poseidon is our god. He rescued our ancestors from a storm on their way home from the Trojan Wars. He brought them safely to this island with their women captives and we’ve lived here ever since in peace.”

Marcus said, “Don’t forget one of the captives was the daughter of Helen of Troy which explains the beauty of our women.”

Johanan thought about Marcus and Aprius’ sister Anteia, and

how attractive she was. Her brilliant blue eyes were unforgettable. He could believe she was a descendant of the legendary Helen.

Aprius laughed. "Don't forget the story is also told that our ancestors were tired of fighting in the wars of the Greek kings. They just abandoned the rest of the army to find a new home and we've been hiding here ever since."

"If your father is afraid of Johanan's teachings," Marcus said, "why did he let you sail with us today?"

Nikias looked away.

"Maybe," said Aprius, "he wants his son to spy on our guest."

Nikias looked back at Aprius, a smug smile on his face. "I can't answer that, but I can say my captain is wise beyond his years."

A flash of silver off to the right, just below the surface of the water, caught Johanan's eye. He looked out to sea and saw it again.

"Over there, Aprius. I think we'll have good fishing there."

Aprius looked out to where Johanan was pointing and then back at him.

"But everyone else is heading toward our usual fishing grounds," Nikias said.

Johanan saw the sea briefly roil. "Look, a great catch waiting for us." The others looked again, but the waters were now calm.

Nikias said, "You may be the best wrestler on the island, Aprius, but you're not the best fisherman. We should follow the others."

Aprius looked between Nikias and Johanan. Then he looked back out in the direction Johanan had pointed. "We'll give our guest a chance to prove himself." He turned the steering oar. "Let's see whose gods are stronger."

Nikias shook his head, but kept silent.

"Prepare the nets. Bring down the sail."

Marcus and Nikias started to prepare the net. Johanan pulled down the sail and kept looking ahead until he saw the flash again.

"Just up there." He pointed again.

"Let's go. Cast away," Aprius shouted.

Marcus and Nikias pitched the net over the port side of the boat. Within moments a river of silvery fins and scales intercepted the net. The bounty filled it so quickly that the boat made a hard turn toward port.

“They’re tunny,” Marcus said over the din of thrashing fish. “These will be gold in the local market. This is a haul not even Poseidon has seen!” He looked at Johanan, suddenly embarrassed by his reference to the Greek god. Johanan just smiled back and reached over to help haul in the net.

Aprius kept on the steering oar to keep the boat steady. Johanan and Nikias held the net as the fish thrashed wildly. The four young men laughed with joy as Marcus used a gaff to hook tunny after tunny and pitch them into the bottom of the boat.

A wave sloshed over the side of the boat. “Enough,” said Aprius. “If we sink the boat we’ll have nothing.” Marcus looked at Aprius and then gaffed one more.

“Marcus.”

Johanan released his end of the net. The river of silvery fish spilled out into the open sea. As Nikias pulled the net in, Johanan scrambled over the thrashing cargo and leaned out over the starboard side to provide a counterweight. Marcus started to spread the fish over the bottom of the boat to even the load. The boat wallowed in the waves.

“Let’s get to shore before we sink.” Aprius said. “Man the oars and pull away!”

Johanan and Nikias each dug an oar out from under the flopping bounty on the bottom of the boat and were soon rowing steadily. Marcus busied himself by bailing out what water he could reach among the fish with a wooden bowl. Behind them, the sails of the other vessels continued out to the fishing grounds. They soon disappeared from sight.

As they approached the shore, many of the women of the village came down to shore to meet them.

“What’s wrong?” one woman shouted over the noise of the waves.

The young men laughed in response.

Johanán looked over his shoulder at the gathering crowd on the beach. It must be unusual for a lone boat to return so soon. He could see the look of concern on faces. Several waded out into the surf to help the boat land.

While Johanán and Nikias continued to stroke through the shallow water, Marcus grabbed the rope tied to the bow and leapt into the surf. Soon he and several of the women were pulling the boat up into the shallows. Finally, the rest of the crew abandoned their posts, jumped into the water, and pushed the bow of the boat up onto the beach.

While Marcus and several women leaned back on the rope, Aprius, Nikias, and Johanán pushed on the stern. Despite their collective effort, they only managed to get the front half of the fully loaded vessel up on the beach.

Finally, Aprius stepped up to the side of the boat, and waved everyone over.

His mother, Thais, asked, “What’s wrong. Why are you back so soon?”

Aprius pointed to the thrashing tunny in the bottom of the boat. The women gathered around to see what was causing the commotion in their peaceful village.

Marcus yelled over the noise of the crowd and the surf. “We caught all of these in one sweep of the net. Johanán called them to us.”

They turned as one, and looked at Johanán. He was standing in the surf at the back of the boat. He noted Anteia in the middle of the gathering, her mouth agape.

A woman shouted out, “We have never seen so many tunny—even caught by the whole fleet in a day. He is a god.”

Johanen shook his head in protest. “No, no. I’m no god.” He waved his hands to the sky. “But God did bless us today.”

Nikias interrupted. “Enough talk. We need to clean these before they spoil.”

The women quickly mobilized. Several ran up into the village, returning quickly with large baskets. They began shuttling the fish up the beach in the baskets. Johanen heaved a basket onto his shoulder and followed them.

Thais met him and pointed to an area covered with small, rounded stones. “Put the basket there. We’ll clean them.”

In several hours, the best of the catch was being grilled for the midday meal. The rest was drying on racks, or being salted and set aside in casks. The fishermen of the village were used to spending their lunchtime on the water. Aprius’ crew seemed to enjoy the novelty of a lunch on shore.

Exhausted and full, Johanen sat in the shade of a tree up off the beach and lay on his back. He looked up at the sky and closed his eyes. The events of the last few days and the struggle with the catch had taken their toll on him. He heard footsteps coming up the beach and sat up. It was Aprius with his seemingly ever present smile on his face. He sat down in the sand next to him and lay on his back.

“How goes it my captain?”

“A few more days like this and I’ll be able to buy my father’s boat and build my own house,” Aprius said.

They lay on the sand in silence, savoring the quiet and their victory over the sea.

“Tell me, Johanen. Is life so easy for followers of the Son of God?”

He paused and thought over the many struggles he’d had since Jesus had called him from his fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. He lifted himself up on his elbow and looked straight at Aprius.

“By no means. The Romans have persecuted and martyred

many of us. We grow sick and die like any man. Many followers of Jesus live in poverty. But we live as a family, as a community of believers who seek the truth. And we have solace in the fact that despite our many trials we will one day live with him in heaven.” He rolled over on his back and flung his arms out to his sides. “But today, today, he has blessed us indeed!”

Aprius lay on the sand with his eyes closed. He breathed deeply for a few minutes. “My friend, will you teach me more of this Jesus? Will you teach me how to be a follower of the Son of God?”

Johanan fell back on the sand. “My captain, I will teach you all I can. Now, of you I ask a favor as well.”

“Ask, and it is yours,” Aprius said.

“Teach me your wrestling skills. I would like to be able to stop an attacker without hurting them, as you do.”

Aprius breathed quietly for a few moments. “We will start after we nap.”

Did you enjoy the first five chapters of *The Last Apostle*? You can preorder the novel at www.TheLastApostle.com. Those who order before the February 1, 2016 release date will have access to special offers, including how to get an autographed copy.

And please visit my website at www.DennisBrooke.com or *The Last Apostle* Facebook page for contests, trivia, and more. I'll be sharing secrets about scenes, locations, and characters, and legends about the apostle John. You'll have a chance to ask me questions, see fan art from readers, and travel deeper into the world of *The Last Apostle* with fan fiction stories. I'd love to have you join in the fun!

Yours in Jesus Christ,

Dennis Brooke