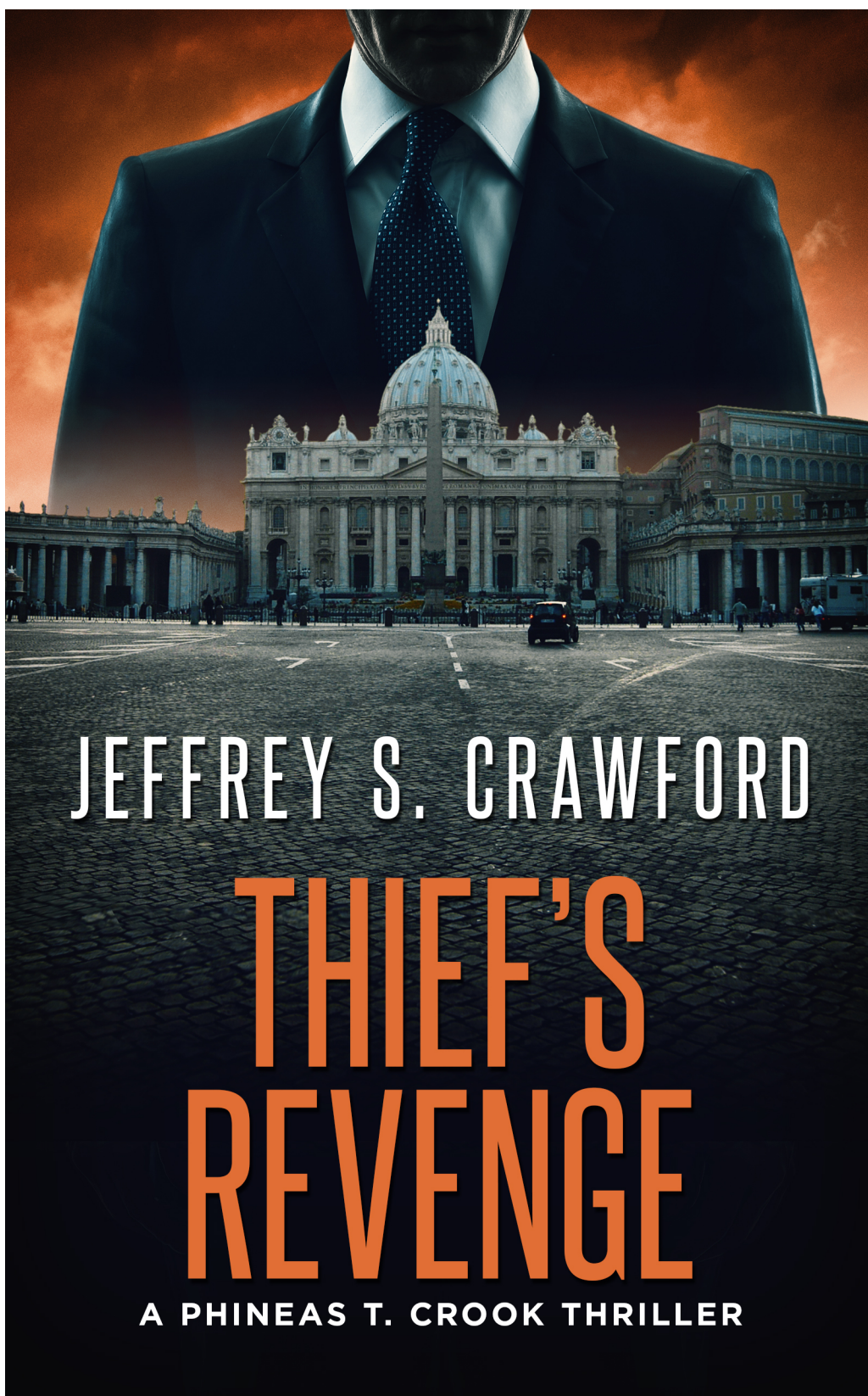




JEFFREY S. CRAWFORD

THIEF'S REVENGE

A PHINEAS T. CROOK THRILLER

Thief's Revenge

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*For my son,
Grayson
From a very proud father*

Prologue

Jerusalem – August, 328 AD

The sun hung high in the cloudless sky. Its rays scorched the dry ground and the exposed skin of the men working to clear the rubble of limestone. A dry breeze did little to cool the air, serving instead to stir up dirt and dust, at times almost to the point that it was suffocating to anyone near the worksite.

A lone figure stood close, eager with anticipation, impervious to the heat and the dust. Her nose and mouth were covered with a purple veil, but her light gray eyes squinted with intensity as the sacred moment was drawing near.

“It is almost time, Empress.” Marcarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, broke away from a large flat stone that eight men were currently working to move from the pit in the ground. He hobbled over to the figure who stood tall in her

supervision of the work that she, herself, had ordered. Marcarius was a short man, who appeared even shorter next to the very tall woman, whose royal robes flowed off of her slender form with grace and elegance.

This was Helena. Empress of Rome. Mother to Constantine, emperor of a newly reunified Roman Empire.

But royalty did not equate to softness when it came to Flavia Iulia Helena Augusta. She was a formidable woman. At the age of eighty, not many women, or men for that matter, could have undertaken the two-year journey that had brought the Augusta Imperatrix from Rome to the holy city of Jerusalem. The fact that Helena was standing here at all was testimony in itself as to the inner and outer power of the emperor's mother.

"The final slab is set for removal. It is a large stone and will take many men to move. But once it is cast aside, we will be free to enter." The bishop's eyes bulged as he rubbed his fatty hands together like a small child before the beginning of a great feast.

Helena only nodded, her gaze continually fixed on the work in the pit.

The lack of response served to make the nervous Marcarius all the more antsy. He let out a timid chuckle and continued to chat, as if to unburden himself of the moment. "We've all heard the story, of course. Of what is buried at the site. But that horrible temple has stood in its place for over one hundred and fifty years, and well...you understand how time has a way of turning stories into myths until one no longer knows where the truth lies. But soon, because of you, Oh Empress, we will finally know. We will finally know the truth."

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Marcarius was referring to the pagan temple of Venus, which had stood on the site of the excavation since 130 AD. Emperor Hadrian had ordered its construction in an attempt to wipe away the memory of Jesus Christ and Christianity itself. Well, Hadrian was now gone and Christianity still remained, and thanks to a vision given to Constantine as well as the prowess of his mother, the temple had been ordered destroyed so that the secret it covered could finally be revealed.

The sound of metal on stone pinged through the dirty air as the men toiled to crack the seal held fast by the final block of stone.

“Come on you lazy fools!” shouted a foreman as he walked briskly around the slab, using force to position each man strategically. “Put your legs and back into it now.”

Each man worked to wedge his iron pry bar into the seam where slab met foundation stone.

“Let’s do this all together. On three. One. Two. Three!” He cracked a leather whip into the hot air by way of encouragement. Each man powered into the limestone slab, bare backs glistening with sweat as muscles strained and bulged.

“Yes, that’s it! Keep going. Keep pushing. Do. Not. Stop!” Another crack of the whip drove the men harder still. Their grunts and groans gave way to another sound. A low moan stirred beneath the earth. It was as if the ground itself was fighting back, a tug of war between flesh and rock.

And then the sound gave way to what could only be described as a sigh. As if one side had finally yielded. Sensing the end was near, the foreman cracked his whip in a

frenzy and shouted more commands of appeal, or perhaps threats.

Helena's eyes widened. She too sensed the ground was yielding to the strength of Roman will. And also slave labor.

"Yes, yes," Marcarius whispered.

As if willing the limestone rock to submit, Helena reached up and unfastened the side of her veil, letting it drop. Her lips pursed into a fine tight line, eyes growing wider still.

And then a mighty WHOOSH issued forth. From a crack. Yes! A crack had been achieved. The earth exhaled and air from within pushed a cloud of dust and vapor out and around the legs of the men. One fell back and away, clearly frightened.

"No! Do not yield!" The wicked whip landed on the back of the poor soul who scrambled to re-insert his pry bar and continue the push. The foreman screamed, "Everyone to this side! Hurry! The seal has been broken. Now is the time to finish." Men from the far side rushed around, slamming their bars into the smallest of cracks which immediately caused the crevice to grow.

"More men!" The whip cracked. A second wave of laborers rushed onto the scene, and that is when the stone gave up the fight. Slowly, it was lifted. The crack growing to an opening. Grappling hooks and ropes were attached so that men could pull from the far side while others continued to push and lift. The limestone lid moved up and up until it was finally standing on its side, vertical and pointed at the sky. And then it carried on over until it slammed back to the earth with a sickening thud.

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“Ahhhhhhh!”

A man let out a scream as the slab landed on his lower half, crushing him. He had tragically slipped in his attempt to get away from the falling stone. Like ants, his co-laborers descended on the stone once again, lifting it just enough to pull him out. It was clearly too late.

As if nothing at all had happened, the foreman marched the short distance to Helena with Marcarius at her side. Bowing on one knee he said, “Empress, the chamber is open. Your will be done.”

“Excellent.” It was the first word Helena had spoken since arriving early that morning. “Marcarius. Come. Let us see what history has hidden but what God has revealed to us today. Ladders, torches, ropes. Let us not waste another moment.” She was a commanding presence indeed.

The foreman went to work barking orders, echoing the queen mother’s wishes. In short order, supplies had been gathered and assembled at the opening of the pit. Torches were tossed down to ascertain the depth, and two ladders, one on each side of the opening, were affixed into place.

The workers parted to each side, opening a pathway for Helena to come forward. And she did. Her majestic appearance caused the men who had toiled for many days to breach the pit to step back even further. She seemed to glide forward until she came to a halt at the edge of the pit. The fire flickering from the torches below could be seen burning on a rock floor, but their light betrayed nothing of the contents Helena hoped she was about to discover.

The Augusta Imperatrix had come a long way, all leading up to this moment. If the earthen chamber were empty or turned out to be a common storehouse for pottery

and other such mundane items, then the whole venture would be a colossal failure. She was counting on the contents below to solidify her son's hold on the Roman Empire. To serve as a symbol that God himself had put his holy hand on Constantine, and that to fight the new emperor would be to fight God.

While she looked calm and in utter control on the outside, Helena's octogenarian heart was beating out of her chest. She felt like a young girl once again, about to uncover some hidden treasure. Well, that was exactly what might be about to happen. And not just any treasure, perhaps the greatest treasure known to mankind in all of history.

Helena was done waiting. She grabbed the post of the ladder and swung her body around. Marcarius came forward to offer assistance, but the short bishop was too late and it was obvious the queen mother needed no help. The earth appeared to swallow her as she slipped out of view. Not wanting to be left behind, the bishop of Jerusalem joined in the descent.

It was only a few minutes later that a team of five - Helena, Marcarius, and three priests hand-selected in advance - had gathered at the base of the two ladders, each having taken up one of the torches.

They found themselves in a large domed chamber at least twenty feet high. It was a simple room, clearly having been hewn from rock as the walls betrayed a slight curve that ran into the darkness on each side. A small shaft of sunlight from the opening above did little to illuminate the chamber, but after a few minutes the group's eyes began to adjust.

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“Let us spread out.” Helena’s voice bounced off the hard surface of the room. “If you find anything, anything at all, do not touch it. Call for me immediately.” And with that, the five members of the dig began moving in opposite directions.

It did not take long. The chamber turned out to be simply not that large and there were no antechambers or tunnels branching off. This was a single room put here for a single purpose.

“Empress!” a voice cried out.

Helena responded with swiftness, rushing toward the voice of the priest. The man’s torch showed the way but revealed nothing more. But as Helena came upon him, joined simultaneously by the others in the room, their collective breath caught in their throats. The power of their five combined lights brought remarkable clarity to what was in front of them.

Three large wooden beams. Perhaps five feet long, propped up neatly against the wall, evenly spaced, one from another. No, not propped up...placed there intentionally.

And there was more.

In front of each wooden beam, on the rock floor of the chamber, was a large iron nail. Large enough to match the gauge of the holes on either end of each wooden beam.

And one other item. This one causing Helena’s blood to rush.

A wooden placard. Set up neatly on a small easel in front of the whole display of beams and nails. The placard contained three lines of ancient script. Each line the same but in a different language: Greek, Hebrew, and Latin.

Marcarius fell to his knees. The priests followed suit.

Helena stood in awe. She had found it. There was no doubt. The message on the placard confirmed it.

But she had seen many forgeries along her way to Jerusalem the past two years. In Egypt, she was led to the remnants of Moses' famous burning bush. She had her doubts. And not far from here, she had been handed what she was told was the cloth used to swaddle the baby Jesus in the manger. Clearly a fake.

She had to know. She could leave nothing to chance.

"Marcarius!" she snapped. "Bring the woman."

"Yes, Empress, of course." The little man hurried to the ladder and called up. A slight figure appeared, silhouetted by the bright light of the opening. It took a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, but a frail and obviously weak woman made it to the bottom of the ladder with great effort. The three priests joined Marcarius and took the woman by the arms as she was near collapse from the effort.

Bringing her to the display of beams, nails, and placard, Helena moved to stand in front of the woman. Even in the firelit dimness of the chamber, the queen mother's features could be seen to soften.

"Sister." Helena reached up and laid her wrinkled hand on the side of the woman's face. "You are not well. Is this true?"

"Yes, Empress. I feel my days are short."

"She is riddled with sickness, Empress," inserted Marcarius. "Alma has worked in my home for many years and in the last year she became increasingly ill and, as you can see, has shriveled to near nothing. The Lord will take her soon, unless there is a miracle."

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“A miracle, yes,” replied Helena. She stared into woman’s eyes. “You are a good woman, Alma. I can see it in you. Perhaps the Lord will grant the miracle Marcarius speaks of today.” She glanced over at the wooden beams. “Sister, go...and lay your hands against the wood, one at a time. Take your time. Go slowly.”

Alma nodded and moved away from Helena’s gentle touch. She walked to the first post. Taking a deep breath and holding it, she leaned in, laying both hands on the coarse wood. The room held its breath with her.

Nothing.

It was but ordinary timber from a local grove of trees, no doubt.

Alma pulled away and looked back at Helena, who only nodded for her to continue. She moved to the second beam and leaned into it in the same manner.

Again, nothing.

This time the woman’s shoulders sagged. Why was she here? What kind of miracle was she looking for? This felt like a cruel game for queens and priests and she felt like a disposable pawn. But there was one more beam of wood.

She shuffled over to it, her strength waning, her body calling out to her to just give up and die. But there was an audience. She had to perform. She took one more deep breath and leaned in. This time closing her eyes.

The moment she touched the splintery wood of the beam, the power shot through her. She gasped and almost fell backward.

Helena’s eyes grew wide and she took her own step forward. “What is it?” she asked excitedly. “What is happening?”

The dim lighting of torchlight made it difficult to see clearly, but it appeared as if the woman's stature grew as they looked on. Her back straightened, vanishing the slump that had been so obvious before. As she stood tall, the tone of the muscles in her arms sharpened and it looked as if the sheen of her hair even brightened. Alma lowered her hands from the wooden beam and turned with confidence toward the party of five. Her face shown in the dark, as if her skin itself was glowing.

"It's a miracle," she gasped. "The Lord has answered."

"How do you know," Marcarius began.

"Because I know," she cut him off. "The disease is gone."

"Yes," Helena responded. She stepped forward and put her hand once again to Alma's cheek. The woman smiled. "I believe it is."

"Marcarius," she barked, causing the little man to flinch. "One more test. We must know with certainty."

"Another test, Empress?"

"The man crushed by the stone slab. Bring him."

"But...Empress...he is dead. How can we...."

"Just bring him, Bishop," she said with less force. "We must know."

He nodded and sent the instructions to the surface. A wrapped body was lowered to the rock floor, the lower half of the binding soaked in blood. The priests took the body and laid it in front of the third beam of wood that had healed Alma.

"Unwrap the body. Let us see this brother's face," Helena instructed. The priests relented to the gruesome task.

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“And now...” Helena walked forward. She took the third beam of wood in her grasp and slowly lowered it to the ground, letting it rest alongside the body of the dead man. “Yes, yes,” she whispered as she touched the wood. And then, getting on her knees in a most unroyal position, she shoved the beam until it came in contact with the body of the man.

And they waited.

One minute.

Then two.

And then...

The man's eyes opened.

She had done it! There was no doubt.

Helena of Rome had found the cross of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1

Turin, Italy – 2:00 a.m., Present Day

The figure in black darted through the Giardini Reali, blending in perfectly with the shadows cast by the massive stand of trees. Breaching the old fortified ramparts to the garden had been easy. Security in the rear part of the complex was almost nonexistent.

The sky was blanketed in clouds and there was no moon. The conditions were ideal for what the thief had in mind this night. With the exception of ground lighting placed sporadically throughout the garden, there was no ambient illumination from above.

It was time to go up.

Flying from tree to tree, the figure arrived easily at the rear of the Royal Palace, a massive square building with a large open-air courtyard in the middle. Two trees nestled up

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next to the ancient brick of the building provided the cover needed. Removing one of two black packs from his back, the figure knelt and extracted a thin rope and firing mechanism with a spiked expansion anchor attached to the end.

Using compressed air, the intruder silently fired the anchor, with rope attached, toward the top lip of the outer wall. The only sound was a soft *WHOOSH*, followed by a grainy thud as the anchor took hold. It was a perfect shot.

Wasting no time, the figure left the first pack behind and, using only his arms, scaled the wall in less than thirty seconds. Had anyone been watching, they would have been impressed with the strength and agility of the climb, almost effortless in appearance, a testimony to a cat-like fitness and skill. But no one was watching. At least not this part of the complex, and certainly not once the figure gained the roof. Now the inky blackness of this particular night - a night so carefully chosen and planned - could be taken full advantage of.

Clad all in black and wearing shoes with thin pliable rubber soles, the figure glided across the clay roof tiles like a shadow moving noiselessly from one end to the next. Arriving at the pointed spire that rose up into the night sky, the figure paused to rest and take in his surroundings. There was no movement below, either in the courtyard of the palace behind him or in the plaza of Saint John the Baptist Cathedral which now lay before him. All was well and going according to plan.

But now came the more difficult part.

The spire of the palace with its impressive rotunda lay almost flush to the smaller dome of the cathedral itself. The

dome would be his access point of entry. A bank of windows evenly spaced around the circumference of the dome designed to let natural light into the cathedral by day would serve to let the thief in by night. The challenge was the score of floodlights that up-lit the white stone blocks of the cathedral from below. He would be no more exposed at any time during the whole operation than when he was cutting his way through the glass of the dome window.

But the black clad figure had come prepared for this moment as well. Reaching up to a tiny clasp on the top of his head, he grabbed hold and pulled. A slender zipper parted the spandex fabric of his black bodysuit and, like a magician, he instantly appeared clad in an opaque suit of the same type, but now blending perfectly with the stone of the cathedral.

The off-white clad figure went to work on a pre-selected window of the dome. Attaching a set of cutting tools from his pack, he made quick work of the glass. Next, he attached a second rope and anchor and then, with another quick glance at the plaza, launched himself over the edge and into the cathedral.

Descending like a spider, the thief touched quietly down onto the marble floor at the front of the chapel, coming to rest behind a huge wooden altar of sorts that held six impossibly tall candles and a gold crucifix. He crouched down to listen. All was quiet and dark. The security cameras, which were surely pointed toward the front of the cathedral's chapel, would likely have only caught a vague image dropping from above. A blur really. Unless the security guard monitoring the cameras happened to be looking at a particular screen at a particular moment and

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been paying close attention, nothing out of the ordinary should have been detected. At least that's what he was counting on.

Lack of movement and alarm confirmed that he was correct.

The doorway to his final destination lay to his right. The thief smiled behind his spandex-covered face. Just as he had hoped and expected, there were no security guards present in the chapel itself. This was a quiet part of Italy and with the exception of what he had come to steal, there was nothing remarkable about this little town at all. As such, it was truly amazing that security for such an important relic was so minimal. Not that he was complaining. There would be challenge enough waiting for him on nights soon to come.

But now was the moment of action. The next ten minutes had to be perfectly timed. The thief had practiced this moment at least a dozen times and executed it to perfection each time. But those were simulations and this was the real thing. As he had so harshly learned in the past, anything can go wrong when it comes time for the execution of a heist. There were simply too many variables to account for no matter how comprehensive a simulation might be. Not that he was planning to turn back. Not now. Not after all that had brought him to this very moment.

Checking his equipment one final time, he set the timer on his watch to ten minutes precisely. Then he pressed START.

He quickly set a small rectangle box on the marble floor and pressed the black button on top. He counted to five in

his head. Exactly as planned, there was a flicker of light that could be seen through the windows of the cathedral.

The small box on the floor looked unassuming, but what it had actually done was emit a high powered EMP – a short burst of electromagnetic energy. This particular EMP only had a range of about one hundred meters in every direction, but that was enough. Enough to disrupt every electrical signal within range. About right now, a security guard sitting in front of his display of monitors would be on his feet, feverishly working to reboot the entire system of cameras and sensors. It would take just over nine minutes to do so.

The beige figure bolted to the heavy wooden door. A combination of traditional and electronic mechanisms held the entrance fast. This was expected. In fact, everything the thief had seen thus far was expected. He'd done his homework in the weeks leading up to the operation, having joined multiple public tours of the cathedral and its attached complex, all incognito of course.

The analog bolts were easily dispatched via manual skill. A decoding device was needed for the more advanced lock. But exactly eighty-three seconds after engaging the door, the intruder was on other side.

A very short hallway led to a set of circular stone steps that carried down to a crypt of sorts, except this small grotto contained no corpses. A second hallway continued on, ending in what was clearly a wall of modern construction. A steel door of impossible strength barred access to the treasure on the other side. But the door was no match for the skill of the thief. It took a bit longer due to the sophistication of the locking system, but exactly one

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hundred and twelve seconds of work yielded the *THUNK* that made the masked figure smile for a second time.

A heave on the door and the final goal was within reach. A muted steel box the size of a coffin lay before him. He walked up to the container and stared down through four layers of bulletproof glass at the contents within. His breath caught in his chest and for the first time this night, the thief found himself paralyzed...caught off guard as it were. The holiness of the moment, or maybe it was the sacredness of the object in front of him, sucked the air out of the hermetically sealed chamber. Whatever the cause, it was for but a moment. A moment he didn't have. Glancing at his watch, he confirmed that the unplanned moment had spanned thirty seconds.

Not good.

Not good at all.

He was behind schedule.

The security system would be up and running again in only five-and-a-half minutes. Then the place would be descended upon by guards like vultures diving on a fresh kill.

In one fluid motion, he withdrew the fist-sized pyramid from his bag, slapping it onto the glass, right in the middle as best as he could eyeball it. One at a time, he pulled on each of the four corners at the base of the device. An attached wire uncoiled, which he fastened to each corner of the container's top. Satisfied the wires were properly connected and the device was secured according to the instructions given to him, he stepped back and withdrew a small remote control.

The sonic disrupter had cost him a small fortune and had not been easy to acquire. One doesn't just walk into Walmart and purchase a high-end security-busting device such as this. It was illegal to say the least. But he'd obtained this one. It could only be used once and then it was useless. No opportunity to test it. Only faith guided him now. If it didn't work, then all his effort leading to this moment will have been for naught. And he would still have to escape, even without the contents of the steel container.

No more time to contemplate.

He pressed the button on the remote.

A buzzing sensation filled the chamber. And then a sound like cracking ice when stepping onto a frozen pond. That was the only thing the burglar could liken it to. He'd expected something more dramatic. Stepping back up to the bulletproof glass, he smiled for a third time in the early morning hour. All four layers of bulletproof glass were compromised with cracks. So many that he could no longer see what lay behind them. It looked very much like the windshield of a car having taken an impact from some heavy object.

Three minutes to go.

He extracted a simple hammer and chisel from his pack. The simplest of instruments but sufficient for the final phase. A fire broke out in the cathedral in 1971 and a team of firefighters were forced to work like mad with sledgehammers to breach the glass and save the container's contents. But thanks to the sonic disrupter, the work this night would be light by comparison. The thief went to work, and with great ease removed the chunks of splintered glass in only a minute and a half.

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There was now nothing between him and his bounty. Few human beings throughout history had been this close to this object. It was truly beautiful in a macabre sort of way. The cloth itself was a full fourteen feet in length with the bottom half folded under and onto a shelf positioned below the top half. And it was the top half that threatened to mesmerize anyone who dared to look.

Mostly at the face.

Or an impression of a face left behind by the seepage of blood. And following the clear outline of the torso, the unmistakable imprint of arms folded across the figure's midsection...a bloody hole in the palm of each hand.

But there was no time.

The clock was near expiration. It took the thief only forty-five seconds to extract a thin linen cloth from his pack, lay the cloth over the ancient relic, and then, using a three-and-a-half-foot wooden dowel matching the width of the cloth, roll all fourteen feet into a tight coil, placing the whole thing in a black cardboard tube with an attached sling.

He was done with seconds to spare.

The opaque clad figure darted back the way he'd come: up the stairs, through the security door and into the chapel, racing at full speed down the side of the building, flying by row after row of dark brown pews and the six stone pillars marking off alcoves on the sides of the chapel. His arrival near the front door of the cathedral coincided perfectly with the entrance of at least a dozen armed security guards. Just as he'd expected, the gaggle of troops stormed right past him toward the front of the chapel and the crypt from which he'd emerged only seconds earlier. They were in such

a rush to secure the chapel's most famous treasure and to catch what they knew by now was a thief in their midst, that they never suspected that same thief would be standing – yes, just standing – feet from the front door, blending in perfectly with the stone column of the first alcove.

As the men thundered past him and toward the security door, the figure reached up for a second time this night and took hold of another clasp on the top of his covered head. As the spandex fell away, a head appeared, covered in a common stocking cap. The figure stepped fully out of the bodysuit wearing khaki shorts and an untucked black t-shirt. With the cardboard tube in hand, he strolled casually out the front door of the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, sauntered across the plaza to the corner of Via della Basilica and Via Porta Palatina where a motorcycle was propped and chained to a tree.

As if unhurried, the man pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unchained the cycle. He glanced back at the cathedral as he mounted and started the bike. Sirens in the distance brought another smile to his face. This time it was a smile of satisfaction.

Mission accomplished.

He gassed the throttle and shot off down the dark street in the opposite direction of the sirens.

The stolen Shroud of Turin slung over his shoulder.

Chapter 2

Alexander Pontia did not believe in God. He did not believe in man either. Truth be told, Alexander Pontia believed only in himself.

The answer as to why was simple. Neither God nor man had ever done anything to help Alexander in his struggle to become the man that stood in front of the mirror straightening his tie, assessing his perfectly manicured nails, finishing with a gentle pat of his freshly cut hair.

“You are pleased?” came the question from the stylist.

“Quite. Thank you, Maria. As always.” He gave a curt nod as if to communicate that she was free to excuse herself.

“Very well, then. Next Tuesday? As always?” The young stylist finished packing her sheers into her travel bag

and bent to gather the plastic onto which Alexander Pontia's jet black hair clippings had fallen.

"Not next Tuesday, no. I will be traveling. We will have to schedule for the following week. On Tuesday as normal, eight thirty sharp, right after my breakfast." Alexander did not like having to wait two weeks between groomings, but sometimes it was unavoidable.

Maria finished with the cleanup and silently left Alexander Pontia standing in front of the plate glass window of his cabin, looking at the majestic peaks of the Grand Tetons. Alexander loved the view. He never tired of it. It was an ever-present reminder of how far he'd come in his forty-two years of life.

All on his own.

No one had helped him find the acreage in this lovely corner of Wyoming. He'd found it on his own. And he'd commissioned the construction of the private log cabin home that sat on the property. Cabin was really not the best descriptor. More like a private lodge.

The money that had been generated to pay for the property and the residence had all come from Alexander's vast bank account. Actually, just one of his many bank accounts. All paid in cash. Alexander Pontia was in debt to no one. He was a true self-made millionaire. Oh, it wasn't because he didn't come from money. The Pontias were a wealthy family. But Alexander's father gave him none of it. Once the young Pontia turned sixteen, his father had cut him off. Completely. There would be no more weekly provision or financial allowance. There would be no inheritance. Whatever Alexander had going forward would come from his own, self-generated resources.

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His father had prepared him for the moment. It was the way of the Pontias, a family with a proud Italian heritage. "A man is only worth as much as he can produce on his own," his father had drilled into him. "Expect no help from me. In the same way that my own father gave me no help. You will make it on your own...or you won't." And with that, Alexander was *on* his own. He'd had very little contact with his father since that day. His mother would reach out from time to time, on holidays and birthdays, and he suspected she wanted more, but he also knew his father forbid it. It was a strange sort of love, but it was the only love Alexander knew, from his parents that is.

Alexander felt a warm presence enter the room. The scent of lavender came with it and he relaxed a bit as a woman took his arm.

"Are you leaving soon?"

"In a bit."

"When will you come back to me?"

Alexander smiled. The sound of Maria's Jeep starting and of her driving down the gravel path to the exit of the property broke the trance he was in. He pulled his eyes from the Tetons and looked down at the one person who loved him more than any other. Jillian was his soulmate, and he had convinced himself that what he did, he did for her. But deep inside, Alexander knew he was motivated most of all by allegiance to self. But he truly did love this woman as much as she loved him.

They met while Alexander was still trying to claw his way up from nothing. He was only eighteen and working at a local pizza restaurant doing deliveries with occasional duties in the kitchen. Jillian worked across the street at the

Dairy Queen. They met one day when he was on break and had decided to walk over for a Butterfinger Blizzard. She caught his eye and he hers. The next day, she walked into the pizza place and ordered some breadsticks to go. They eventually exchanged names and numbers. That led to the regular swapping of burgers and ice cream for pizza. From there, love blossomed.

They moved in together, reasoning two incomes applied to one rent payment made sense, and shortly after that, decided to get married. He'd never had eyes for another woman.

One night, while lying in bed together, sick of going nowhere with their minimum wage income, not to mention being sick of eating free fast food, Alexander had an idea: What if they robbed a bank?

It sounded crazy at first. Who robs a bank? Druggies, losers, bad people, desperate people. Well, Alexander wasn't any of the first three categories, but he was quickly growing desperate, or at least dissatisfied. They could do it, he was convinced. They may not have college degrees, but they were smart. They'd pick a small branch of a local bank one town over. Alexander would let his beard grow in preparation. He'd wear a hat and oversized clothes. Jillian would go along pretending to be just another customer. Once Alexander slipped a note to the teller explaining he had a gun and wanted two bags stuffed with hundreds, she would cry out and pretend to have a panic attack, yelling that the bank was being robbed. She would fall down and sob and flail and beg for her life. This would create a panic. People's memories become fuzzy when they are panicked. That was the point. Alexander would take the bags of

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money and run to a waiting bicycle as people rushed to comfort and tend to Jillian. Once the commotion was over and the police were called, Jillian would simply disappear before they could question her. Alexander, having ditched the bike, would be waiting in their car one block away and they would calmly drive back home. He would shave his beard just in case anyone posted security footage on the news, and then they would lay low.

The plan worked like a charm. The couple pocketed just under ten grand and the police never came knocking.

And so it began. A new “career” of sorts.

As he looked into Jillian’s eyes an idea came to mind. “I probably need eight or nine days and then I’ll be home. You shouldn’t stay here alone waiting on me. Why don’t you fly to the house in Cancún? Invite a few of your girlfriends you haven’t seen in a while. My treat, of course.” He winked at her and she squeezed his arm tight, smiling.

“You take great care of me.”

“None of this would be possible without you by my side.” He leaned down and gave her an affectionate kiss.

An approaching thumping pulled them apart as the blue and white Sikorsky S-76 swooped in and landed on the Pontia’s helipad just off to the right of their view from the windows.

“Time for you to go, Love.”

“Yes, it is. I will see you next week.”

With that, Alexander turned and left the room, headed for his private helicopter, which would carry him to the airport in Jackson Hole where his private jet would carry him to New York City. The airport wasn’t really that far,

only a twenty-minute drive. But Alexander liked to show off.

He needed no bags. His nondescript residence on the upper east side of Manhattan had all the clothes and belongings he would need. As always, his office in New York would be the staging point for another operation. His next operation.

Yes, it all started with a small bank in a rural town. But banks were a thing of the past. Too easy and the payoff too small. What Alexander Pontia was involved in now was bigger. Much bigger.

Chapter 3

Just over three hours later, Alexander Pontia's Learjet 75 delivered him to the Sheltair FBO at La Guardia International Airport. A black Chevy Suburban was waiting for him as usual. Twenty-five minutes after that, he was deposited on the corner of 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue.

Stepping out of the SUV and onto the sidewalk, Alexander Pontia inhaled long and deep, and with a slow turn took in the city. The air quality wasn't on par with the mountain air of Wyoming, but nevertheless, there was something intoxicating, addictive even, about the sights and smells of New York City. A thousand people, easily within eyeshot, all moving toward some unseen goal, thousands more beyond what he could see all doing the same. Taxis and buses honking and jockeying for position. Scaffolding and workmen – there was always some sort of renovation going on. A street project a hundred yards down Lexington.

A dozen different smells wafting past. Pigeons pecking about for some morsel. All of it and more made up the most exciting city on planet Earth.

Looking up, Alexander noticed for the first time that the sky was clear blue. The same as in Wyoming but different. Instead of the Tetons, the spire of the Chrysler Building found his gaze. Wasting no more time, he headed straight into the lobby of the art deco building. Making his way instinctively to the bank of elevators, he punched the up button and was rewarded with the chime of an immediately available lift. Three others joined him, all hitting buttons for different floors. The button Alexander hit had a 20 on it. The doors closed and after depositing two of the riders on other floors, the doors opened for Alexander. He stepped out of the elevator, rounded a corner, and was greeted by the large backlit golden letters declaring the international headquarters of Pilate Enterprises.

This was home base for Alexander Pontia. His pride and joy. What he had worked so hard for, for so many years. He had started with nothing. Literally. And now this.

Pilate Enterprises was officially the controlling entity for three separate businesses. Chief among the three was Token Exchange, an auction house specializing in the authentication, sale, and transfer of ancient art and relics. While Token Exchange was open to handling and had handled all sorts of auctions – they once moved to sell an original collection of Joe Shuster’s drawings of Superman before Action Comic #1 ever featured the now iconic superhero – they focused primarily on the *old*. Sometimes

the very old, as in thousands of years old. Other times, old simply meant hundreds of years.

Such was the case the previous week. Token Exchange signed a contract to auction off a golden dragon from the Yuan Dynasty of the early 1300s. Alexander authenticated the piece personally, although he had little doubt going in. The provider was a friend, Marcus Cabrera, an Argentinian who had done business with Token Exchange for more than a dozen years and had never brought anything less than authentic merchandise to Alexander.

The dragon would likely go for \$200,000 or a bit more when it auctioned in two weeks. Token Exchange would get twenty percent. Not big money, but then again, Marcus Cabrera was a friend. And he would be back with bigger prizes.

Notable compared in size to other well-known auction houses such as Sotheby's and their eighty locations in forty countries, Token Exchange did well and had branch offices in twelve countries. This was just fine for Alexander Pontia. He had no interest in being the biggest and dealing with the public attention that would come with such success. Alexander defined success in other ways and his real interests demanded a certain amount of discretion.

The second company under the banner of Pilate Enterprises was Dominion Safe, a corporate security firm providing elite protection services for companies and their leadership. Because of the security demands of Token Exchange, Alexander had decided a decade prior to stop paying for said security and simply start providing it himself. It was a short step from that point to marketing security services to his business partners in the antiquities acquisition

industry. And thus, Dominion Safe was born. Even before an item was identified for auction, Alexander Pontia was already involved in its protection via Dominion Safe. The security arm of Pilate Enterprises grew rapidly after that as Alexander's partners began to talk up Dominion Safe with their own business associates. Using a combination of retired military and police from around the world, along with the DNA of Alexander Pontia that required nothing less than perfection, Dominion Safe had grown to elite status in the security world. *Stay Safe with Dominion Safe* was the company's well-known tag line.

The final leg of the Pilate Enterprise's tirade of companies was a nondescript shipping company simply named Straight Line. Rather than rely on third party shippers and carriers, Alexander, once again, decided it would be better – and more lucrative – to provide premium shipping services for items coming to auction. Plus, there was the need to safely ship the items to their new owners after the sales were made final. *We are, after all, talking about ancient and priceless artifacts*, he reasoned. And that was the selling point to his partners. The idea gained fast traction and in short order led to a small fleet of planes, armored trucks, helicopters, etc. All designed to ferry valuable auction items to and from their intended destinations quickly and efficiently on, yes, a straight line.

All of this together carved a unique spot for Alexander Pontia in the world of antiquities. If you had an item that needed to make the auction market, Alexander Pontia under the banner of Pilate Enterprises could guard it, transport it, and sell it for you. It was a one-stop-shop kind of experience working with Alexander Pontia. Those doing

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business with Pontia liked it that way and so did he. All in all, it proved to be a lucrative arrangement. It also gave Alexander Pontia the perfect system in which to conduct, let's say, more private sorts of dealings. The kind of transactions that one would not necessarily want advertised or documented on "the books." The world of ancient artifacts and antiquities can sometimes produce the need for, what some would term as, illegal exchanges.

Alexander breezed past the beautiful blonde receptionist stationed behind an imposing oak station. Tess Greenway may have had the look of a Fox News personality, but she was a killing machine. Literally. The Joplin, Missouri, native had served a stint in the Air Force choosing not to go to college. After the Air Force, she was trolling around on Ancestry.com and discovered that she had, of all things, a Jewish bloodline. This led her on a personal journey of self-discovery that eventually landed her in Israel serving in the Israeli Defense Force. The IDF schooled her in the art of Karv Maga, a combination of martial arts techniques derived from aikido, boxing, wrestling, judo, and karate.

Tess excelled in the art of Karv Maga, and after righting the wrongs of the world for the Jewish Nation, she decided to take her skills to the private sector. The pay was much better, and her skirmishes along the borders of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict combined with the terrorist elements of the PLO and Hezbollah had jaded her morals. Alexander stumbled upon her in one of his market trips to the Middle East and knew immediately she would be a perfect fit for Dominion Safe. Her combination of skill and

beauty eventually pulled her to the larger Pilate Enterprises side. Yes, Tess Greenway was both disarming and lethal.

“Good morning, Mr. Pontia,” she called out as he swept by. “Dimitri is waiting for you in your office,” she finished as Alexander acknowledged her in turn with only the wave of a hand. She was not offended. She understood that when Alexander was in go-mode this was how he was. Focused.

Pontia’s twentieth floor corner office had a spectacular view of the New York skyline. But none of this caught the self-made millionaire’s attention. He was consumed instead by the shoebox-sized old oak box sitting on the small table between two leather highbacked chairs.

Dimitri Bezrukov sat in one of the chairs.

“You’ve got it!” Alexander exclaimed. “Was there any trouble with the operation?”

The large Russian laughed. “I believe the saying is, *like taking candy from a baby*. It was no problem, Comrade.”

Alexander knew very little about the background of Dimitri Bezrukov other than the fact that he was Russian, born and bred, and that he was former GRU, Russian military intelligence. Like most people that worked for Pontia, money had replaced nationalism as the primary motivator. The six foot five, two-hundred-and-fifty pound Russian war machine had been with Alexander since the beginning. He was Alexander’s first hire, in fact, and the man had remained fiercely loyal for many years now.

As always, Dimitri sported a bald head, with a perpetual two-day look of stubble covering his dome, and was found dressed impeccably in an expensive suit from Armani, Brioni, or some other fine clothier. In this way he

mimicked his employer. He was also the head of Dominion Safe and thus handled every aspect of security for Pilate Enterprises as a whole, as well as for Alexander personally.

“And they have no idea it is gone?”

“No idea. The forgery you had commissioned was laid perfectly in its place,” he replied with a satisfied grin. “The cloth is never removed as a point of order. It could be a decade or longer before they realize the real artifact has been taken. And honestly, they may never know.”

Alexander was salivating. “Perfect,” he whispered. His eyes bulged as he took the box in hand and moved to the larger meeting table set against the south-facing window. “Did you have to...handle anyone in order to get it?” Not that he cared but Alexander felt compelled to ask.

“You mean did we kill anyone, Comrade?” The Russian laughed again. “Sadly, no.”

Alexander looked from the box to Dimitri. It was impossible to tell if he was joking or serious. He raised an eyebrow.

“It was simple really. The security in Spain as a whole is weak. And at the Cathedral of San Salvador itself, it is weaker still. The city of Oviedo is not overly large. Something like two hundred thousand people is all. The policia there are amateurs compared to the team I sent. As I said, it was a simple operation.”

“Good, good.” Alexander was most pleased. “Then let us see the fruit of your labor.”

He gently lifted the lid of the box. Not that the box itself was anything special, but the gravity of the moment caused him to move with reverence. Almost forgetting himself, he rushed to his desk and withdrew a pair of white

cotton gloves, donning them as he made his way back to the now-opened box. Carefully, as if handling the most delicate of objects, he removed the stained cloth from the silk-lined container. He set it on the table and began the process of unfolding it. Not until all thirty-three inches of the cloth were stretched out did he step back to actually look at the piece.

He felt his breath catch. It was his. He now “owned” it. The blotchy brown image on the cloth sent chills up his spine. He was staring at the Sudarium of Oviedo. The bloodstained face cloth of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4

“Happy birthday!!”

The small crowd shouted as cardboard horns blew and confetti was thrown into the air. Phineas Crook blushed and worked to stifle a grin as he gave his wife Autumn a raised eyebrow.

“You got me,” he admitted.

She was clinging to his arm and beaming with a smile that lit up the already festive room. They were actually gathered in the reception area of the Hobbs College of Theology and Ministry located on the second floor of Montgomery Hall on the campus of Oklahoma Baptist University.

The couple had just stepped off of the elevator in a ruse devised by Phin’s wife. Something about wanting to borrow a giraffe carving from Africa that he kept in his office. They had dozens of animal carvings around their home from

Phin's numerous trips overseas, but Autumn had insisted she needed this specific trinket. She didn't, of course. And Phin, always in the posture of doing whatever it took to please his bride, had stepped right into her little surprise birthday party for him.

Phin found himself staring at his closest friends, most of them colleagues in the Hobbs College or other departments around the university. Dr. Vance Mildrot, Dr. Leslie Wang, Dr. John R.L. Smitherton, all caught his eye and were beaming.

"So many doctors in one room," he called out, "yet if I were to suffer a heart attack in this moment due to shock, I would be in severe trouble." The group laughed at Phin's well-placed jab at the academic prowess in the room. "Thank you all, sincerely. It means so much that you would come and wish me happy birthday."

And with that the gathering broke out in a chorus of *Happy Birthday to You*. A cake with a flaming 3 and 6 appeared, prompting Phin to make a wish and blow the candles out. Another round of clapping and well wishes and everyone broke into small groups of conversation as Phin worked his way around the reception area. Even Carol, the receptionist and assistant to the dean, had come. Phin apologized for the mess in what was essentially her space. Gracious as ever, she gave him a hug and told him not to worry.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" An arm grabbed Phin and pulled him around.

"Max! I didn't see you. I thought maybe you'd skipped out."

“Uh uh. No way I’m missing the birthday of my best friend. Somebody had to pick up the cake while you and Autumn were eating dinner. I barely made it before you guys arrived, though. You were early getting here, my friend. You almost blew your own surprise.”

“Gee, I’m sorry, Max. This coming from the man who is almost always late to everything,” Phin ribbed him back.

Dr. Max Allred truly was Phin’s best friend. The two had been close since their days in college at the same university where they now both served, Max as the associate dean of the Hobbs College and Phin as the esteemed associate professor of the Sam and Martha Goldman Chair of Preaching and Pastoral Ministry.

“Look, I’ve got to go take care of a few things...and then we all chipped in and got you a gift we want you to open.”

“Max, you shouldn’t have - ”

“Nonsense, ol’ buddy! Just hold tight and I’ll be back in a few, but first, I think someone would like to say hello.”

Max shoved a phone into Phin’s hand and hurried away. Phin looked at the screen and saw what looked like a video cued up and ready for him to press play. Trying to block out the noise around him, Phin turned the volume to max and hit the little triangle in the middle of the screen. There was some jostling and erratic movement, and then the face of a square-jawed soldier with a crew cut filled up the screen. As if talking to someone else, the gruff voice began to bark, “This gadget on?...What do I do now?... Oh... okay, 10-4.... You there, Doc? They’re giving me the thumbs up so I’m just gonna talk.... So, uh, it’s me. Ol’ Sarge. But I guess you know that by now. So... yeah... so... happy

birthday, Doc. Hope it's a good one... yeah... Sarge out." More jostling of the camera. "Is that it? What do I do now? Oh..." And then the playback stopped. Sergeant Billy Warren. Phin smiled. Maybe one of the best birthday greetings he'd ever received given who the sender was.

"Excuse me, Phin. Just wanted to shake your hand and wish you a happy birthday as well."

Phin lifted his head and the look of surprise must have been evident. Dr. Clayton Reynolds was smiling and took Phin's hand in a warm embrace. Phin had not expected the dean of the Hobbs College to be here as well, but here he was nevertheless. Phin was genuinely touched.

"Dean Reynolds, how good of you to come." And Phin meant it. He and Clayton Reynolds had not always been on the best of terms. Phin had a penchant for what the dean deemed erratic and unpredictable behavior, and Phin's personal interests and pursuits did not always align with the vision and mission of the university. But the tension between the two had cooled considerably in the last year with the return of Phin's wife, Autumn, the couple becoming new parents of their adopted son, Patrick, and Phin's promise to pursue a quieter pace of life.

"I wouldn't have missed it, really." Even in a social setting Dean Reynolds was imposing. His six foot plus frame capped with a head of salt and pepper hair gave the man an ever-present air of authority, even without his normal uniform of a suit and tie. "Listen, Phin, I won't be staying long."

"Yes, of course, I understand. You must have had a busy day, I know." Phin didn't mean to cut the dean off,

but for some reason his nerves had kicked in. Maybe it was the look on the dean's face or something in his eye.

Dean Reynolds smiled and continued, "Oh, all days are the same this time of year and we are all busy, aren't we? As I was saying, I can't stay long, but I wonder if I might have a quick word." He nodded toward the open door to his office. "I don't want to take you from your party and it won't take long. I promise."

The dean began to move toward his office and it was clear Phin had no choice in the matter. Not that he minded. His interest was peaked. Very rarely did Dean Clayton Reynolds go out of his way to engage Phin one-on-one, so it must be a matter of some importance. Phin moved to follow and just happened to look back over his shoulder. Autumn was looking at him from across the room, a look of concern on her face. She'd seen the exchange. Phin mouthed the words, *don't worry*. He followed with a wink and ducked into the dean's office.

Dean Reynolds was already seated at his personal conference table holding a manilla folder. "Have a seat, Phin. We've got a small problem and we think you might be just the person to help us with it."

Chapter 5

We, thought Phin. *Who is we?*

And the idea of being pulled into a problem of any sort was not the kind of birthday he had been aiming for. A day of teaching classes, a few advising appointments, a nice dinner with his wife - that had been the plan. The surprise party was a nice touch, and while unnecessary for a man turning thirty-six, he knew it meant a lot to Autumn and so he was happy to go along. She'd missed so much the last few years and was working to make up for lost time. But sitting in the dean's office about to be presented a problem had not been on the radar when the day began.

"Go ahead and have a seat, Phin." Dean Reynolds likely sensed Phin's hesitancy. "I promise this won't take long. I need to bring you in the loop and to get your opinion."

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Not that he had a choice at this point, he was the dean after all, but Phin was a sucker for a good mystery and the cryptic nature of how Reynolds was speaking to him was beginning to draw him. And who doesn't want to be "in the loop" and to give their "opinion" when someone higher up the food chain comes asking for help? Phin inwardly chided himself for his earlier attitude and took a seat across from Dean Reynolds.

"Absolutely, Clayton. What can I do to help? You mentioned a problem?" Since Dean Reynolds called Phin by his first name, he typically returned the gesture in private settings. It always felt a bit unnatural to do so – Reynolds was such an imposing figure – but Phin forced himself to do so anyway. Reynolds – Clayton – didn't seem to mind.

"What I'm about to share with you is sensitive and you will understand what I mean once I begin. It goes without saying that I need your confidentiality on this matter."

"Absolutely. No need to worry. I'll follow your lead in however you direct on this."

Reynolds smiled and continued. "As you know, the university has just gone through another round of budget cuts." Phin's heart sank. Any optimism he had mustered up began to fade. "The school is going through a season, Phin. Nothing to be too concerned about and nothing any other institution similar to ours isn't facing. The climbing cost of education makes it harder for parents to afford and thus makes the competition for new students that much more fierce. What we need at OBU is a competitive advantage. Something that sets us apart from all others. Are you following me, Phin?"

Phin nodded. He was following, he just had no clue where Reynolds was going.

“So there have been discussions. President MacDonald himself has been spearheading the talks. They were actually his idea. I was hesitant at first but it really does all make sense.”

Phin was no longer following. He wrinkled his brow, trying to make sense of what Reynolds was talking about and how it could possibly have anything to do with him.

“Make sense?” Phin interrupted. “What makes sense?”

“The Garden of Eden.”

Reynolds uttered the name cautiously and then sat back to see how Phin would respond. Phin was stunned. Shocked. He thought his heart would rupture as his blood pressure soared.

“I’m sorry...the Garden of Eden?” he was able to stammer. “What about the Garden of Eden?”

“Well...” Reynolds began, clearing his throat into his fist. “We know, obviously, where it’s located. Or I suppose I should say, you know where it’s located. The president would like to establish a Center for Modern Biblical Exploration. Not formal archaeology per se, but something a bit more novel. This new center would lean heavily on the biblical text, something that our Baptist tradition is convinced is the inspired Word of God. That means it is true and trustworthy. That means we can read it and when it talks about matters of geography, those places...those locations are accessible to us today. They can be explored in their modern context and written about. This is all still a loose concept as of right now, but President MacDonald believes that the Center for Modern Biblical Exploration, if

promoted correctly, would be something wholly unique in the world of private Christian academia and would bring national and international attention to the school. That would do nothing but help with institutional development - aka *giving* - and enrollment.”

Dean Reynolds paused to allow Phin time to consider what he was saying and hopefully catch the vision.

His head was still spinning and he unceremoniously blurted out, “So what does this have to do with the Garden of Eden?”

Reynolds nodded. “We would like to make the Garden of Eden the first project of the new center. There is so much that could be written about it-”

“Absolutely not.” Phin raised his voice louder than he intended, cutting off his boss. “There’s no way, Clayton. You and MacDonald both know this. The legal team from LaPhage was crystal clear and we are bound by confidentiality. Nobody is allowed to talk about the garden. Can’t write about it. Can’t say anything at all about my and Max’s trip there. Period. The whole subject is off limits.”

Phin’s exploration of the Garden of Eden had been the most harrowing experience of his life. And it had almost taken his life, and the life of his best friend Max Allred, and also a former student of his, Jason Morris. It actually *did* take the life of Ruth LaPhage, the CEO of LaPhage Industries, the entity that had financed the whole operation to find the garden. Ruth’s body had never even been recovered and neither had Tony Chen’s body, another casualty of the garden whose life ended in a brutal fashion. The Garden of Eden was forbidden in more than one sense.

By LaPhage Industries. And by God. It was a dangerous place.

“Yes, we understand that LaPhage Industries has locked out all discussion, publications, etc. of everything that happened at the garden. You can’t even talk about ever going there. But, listen Phin, our own attorneys have examined the documents that were signed.” Dean Reynolds’s excitement was growing and the pit in Phin’s stomach was sinking even further. “It’s complicated, of course, but the short answer is this: You and us...the school...we are all prevented from acknowledging what happened in the past with the Garden of Eden. But there is no language that says we cannot go back. Obviously, you are the key to this, Phin. You’re the only one that truly knows where it is. You and Max, of course, but you are the one who found it. You did all the research on it. There is nothing in the LaPhage legalese that prohibits *future* exploration. So, we go back, Phin. You lead the way. You write it all up. You get the publishing credit. And OBU benefits. We say nothing at all about your previous trip. LaPhage Industries is never mentioned. It will be as if that trip never happened, which is what LaPhage wants. It’s a win-win. President MacDonald is convinced that he has a donor who would pay for the whole operation if you agree. What do you say, Phin? Are you ready to go back?”

Phin ran his hand through his floppy brown hair, a habit when he was stressed or thinking. Clayton Reynolds was not an easy man to spar with. “This can’t happen,” he began slowly. He looked Reynolds in the eye, matching his gaze. “Clayton, people died in the garden. It’s a forbidden

place. I never understood that before. Until I went. We can't...I can't do this."

Dean Reynolds looked sympathetic. He was surely disappointed with Phin's response, and for a moment Phin thought he'd succeeded in dissuading the man.

"I understand this is hard, Phin. Everything you've said I anticipated." *Of course you have*, Phin mentally barked to himself. *You're Clayton Reynolds. You anticipate everything.* "You are a vital part of our OBU family, Phin. We don't want you doing anything that would jeopardize life or limb. The LaPhage exploration was haphazard and sloppy. You would be in charge this time, Phin. You would call the shots. Go, but only go as close as is safe and no closer. Photograph and video what you can but take no chances. Fly drones over the garden and capture what you are able to on video. Anything is better than nothing. It will be completely different than before."

Clearly nothing Phin could say would stop this train from moving down the tracks. The whole scenario was nearly laughable to Phin. It wasn't but a year ago that he sat in this very office, chided for even believing the Garden of Eden still existed. His very job was on the line, he was told, if he continued to pursue his interests in finding the garden. An embarrassment to the institution, he was. And now that same institution was counting on him to steer it through a rough season. He was no longer an embarrassment. He was valuable. And the same man who once questioned him was now pleading with him.

"I don't know, Clayton. I need to think about it. Talk to Autumn. You understand." What he really needed was to get out of this office and buy himself some time to figure

a way out of this mess. He needed to talk to Max. Max would understand. He'd been there too, seen the beauty and horror of it all.

"Yes, of course. Take some time. No rush. I've already taken more of your birthday than I intended."

Phin shook hands with the dean and left the office to rejoin his party. A few people had left but most were still mingling. Phin noticed a confused looking FedEx delivery man standing by the elevator. He had just exited and was looking around the crowd for someone in charge. Phin made his way to the young man.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I've got a package for a Dr. Phineas Crook. Had a full route today so I'm running late. I normally deliver packages to the student center but this one had specific instructions to deliver to Montgomery Hall. Saw the lights so thought I'd give it a shot."

"Well, you're in luck. Or I suppose I'm in luck. I'm Dr. Crook."

The FedEx employee seemed relieved to hand the package over and hustle on his way.

"What have you got there, Hon?" Autumn arrived at his side, taking his arm.

"Oh, looks like a package intent on finding its way directly to my office. I'm sure it's some vendor peddling software or the next great piece of media technology. It can wait."

But Phin failed to put the package aside. Instead, he turned the shoebox-sized parcel over in his hands, looking for some clue as to the sender. It was wrapped in plain brown paper and had no markings of any kind except for

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the standard FedEx stickers and postage label. He found himself popping loose the tape on one end and removing the wrapping. Max Allred joined the pair, a look of curiosity on his face.

The paper cast aside revealed a shiny hunter green box made of a light material that felt like basal wood. A lid included delicate gold hinges and a latch that clicked open with the slide of Phin's thumb. He set the box on a small table that had an assortment of pamphlets featuring the college's degree programs and an upcoming mission trip.

Perhaps this was not the time or the place to open the box but Phin felt he'd come too far to turn back. The presence of his wife and friend served to urge him on. With only a slight tremor in his hand, Phin lifted the lid and was met with a curious sight. The interior was layered in cotton and sitting on top, as if supported by a cloud, was a sliver of some sort of hardwood. Phin stared at the gnarled sliver the size of an overly large spike.

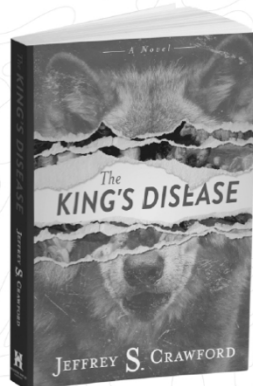
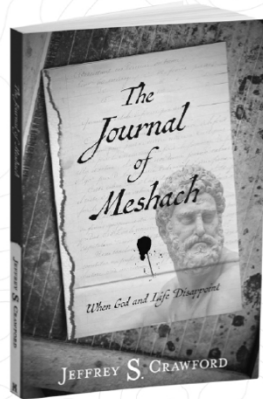
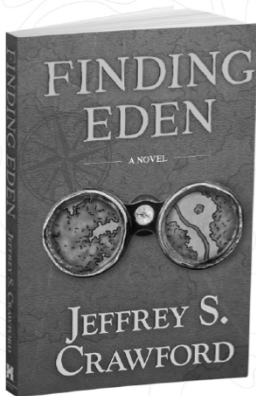
A gasp and Autumn was pointing at the underside of the box's lid. "Phin look."

A message painted in black script read:

Happy Birthday, Little Brother. Are you ready to play a game?
-Remus

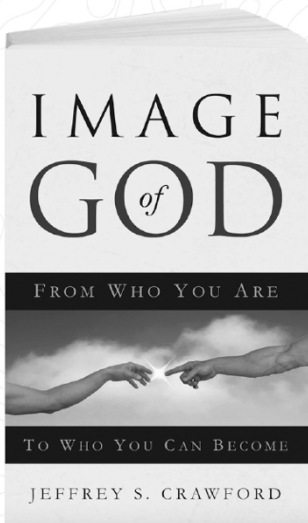
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