



THE  
CHRIST  
REPORT

*A Novel*

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

JAMES MICHAEL  
PRATT

# THE CHRIST REPORT

A Novel From

JAMES MICHAEL PRATT

*New York Times Bestselling Author of*

*THE LAST VALENTINE*

Now a Film

“THE LOST VALENTINE”

by

HALLMARK HALL OF FAME

# THE CHRIST REPORT

*A Story of Love, Faith, and Redemption*

by

James Michael Pratt

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Author-Owned PowerThink Publishing, LLC

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**SNEAK PEEK for JAMES MICHAEL PRATT BOOK CLUB 2024**

## The Holy Birth

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

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

## Easter Morning

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

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

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

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

*“Behold I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice , and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”*

*~Book of Revelations 3:20 (KJV)*

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## PROLOGUE

Caesarea, Palestine, 69 CE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

~ The Friend

## Present Day

### Sam Robertson Live Christmas Special

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know,” she mouthed back.

“Is he okay?” Larry asked.

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

Sam obeyed.

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

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

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

Mary cued the cameramen for a pause.

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

“How do you feel Sam?”

“A bit emotional,” he answered.

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

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

“Then let’s go for it!” she answered.

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

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

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

Larry stood once again by camera #1 and gave his countdown finally pointing to Sam as he mouthed, “You’re on!”

Sam started calmly without prompts or notes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE INNKEEPER

Bethlehem – Eve of the Roman Tax Census, 1 BC

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

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

“Yes, Master Cleopas.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After several tense moments, the slovenly soldier hunched slightly forward, picked up a napkin, and dabbed at the corner of his mouth—now dripping with the last ounce of wine from his



cup—and stuffed it with the last morsels of meat on his plate. He let out a drunken groan, as the soldier next to him spoke in the foreign tongue. Then they both chuckled. A snarl, a wave for the boy to hurry, and a look of contempt for this crowd was the answer from the troublemaker.

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

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

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

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

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

Cleopas recalled watching as Joseph carefully chiseled the words into the soft rectangular piece of wood. Joseph was the son of Jacob, also a carpenter. This Joseph now would be four years

older than Cleopas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But first he must prove himself to Jarom, a rather stubborn man who no doubt would

demand proof that the youthful innkeeper was capable of the task Simeon had left to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Master."

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

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

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

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

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

A knock came at the door.

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

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

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

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

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

“You know Simeon?”

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

“I am Cleopas. Simeon is with God - just one year ago now. Simeon was my uncle. I came to dwell with him in my eighth year.”

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

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

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

“I -” Cleopas stumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cleopas, for the first time, glanced over at the pain-faced figure atop the donkey. “Mary?”

he asked. *I have a Mary*, he thought. She was to be here in the morning. “Mary, you say?”

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

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

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

*Mary*, he thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But Cleopas, Master, I -”

“Asa! Do as I say, now!”

The boy nodded and retreated.

“Come,” Cleopas urged, and reached for the arm of the man. “I have shelter to give you

without cost. There is clean straw and I am ordering adequate bedding for you.”

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

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

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



## SAM ROBERTSON REPORTS

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

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

“Welcome Cardinal McIntyre,” Sam began.

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

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

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

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

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

important day and event in world history, along with the Lord's birth."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robertson was taken aback. No one called him *Samuel* anymore. "I do not fear what I cannot see. Of course, if there is a God," he shrugged, "I would fear him... I guess," he added with

a laugh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ve offended you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you for the offer, Cardinal McIntyre. I’m honored. But I have an *exceptional* Christmas celebration of my own planned. I’ve been married one year now and we’ll be spending

our first Christmas together in seclusion — and being a little stingy, I guess. Joy’s college-age son will be at the grandparents’ place. So, it’ll be just the two of us — definitely a *no-room-at-the-inn* style celebration.”

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

Three failed marriages and six grown children later, Sam had finally met the girl of his dreams, Joy Adams, though he wondered if she could ever love a man with so many miles on him.

Why should she care at all for him? Was it the money?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't look so down, boys," he chuckled under his breath so only they could hear him. "It takes time to know what a woman's really looking for." Then he winked across the room to Kit

and escorted Joy from the party, wrap in hand.

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

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

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

“Oh, why is that?” Sam probed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“From Colorado. Grew up in Denver through the ‘70s and Salt Lake City in the 1980s,” she said. My father was a government employee. After my dad transferred to Boise, Idaho in 1990, I enrolled at Boise State, graduating with a Masters in Journalism in 1995.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's wrong?"

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

"Did I say something wrong?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry. Sunday is kind of special to me," replied Joy. "I promised my son Michael we'd attend church and hang out together. He's out of school on spring break, and I've found it necessary to balance out all the other influences of the week by being strict in that area. You know, keeping one day to myself. But, perhaps another time. Here's my number..."

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He often asked his guests this question, sometimes couching it as follow-up to an especially profound answer. His interviewees were all the great ones of the world: presidents, generals, sports



stars, actors, musicians, rappers, motivational gurus, kings, queens, princes, and spiritual leaders.

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

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

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

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

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

## DEAD MEN DON'T LIE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE TEST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Told ya.”

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

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

She chuckled, smiled, and pointed to the chair.

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

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

“Left,” he sighed.

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

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

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

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

“I’ll have your job,” he whimpered.

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

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

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

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

“Treadmill?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sam nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m fine, Rudy,” Sam huffed.

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

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

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

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

“No, I want to keep going. Get these accursed exams over with. I’ve got a hot date and... Hey! Where are you going?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## GOOD OMEN

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

“You sure did. Is this really necessary?”

“Doctor’s orders.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



me more time with Joy,” he whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe a tickle...”

“Out of breath over simple tasks?”

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

“Somewhat faint, lightheaded, dizzy?”

“Well, I fell in love last year...”

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

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

“You’re alive.”

“Oh.”

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

“The bad news?” Sam asked dejectedly.

“You need immediate bypass surgery.”

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

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

“You’re sure?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doctor Gray didn’t respond.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have a death-wish or something?”

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

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

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

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

“What’s an AMA form?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What a God-forsaken, lousy mood these people are in,” Sam mumbled as he slipped his trousers on. Minutes later, standing outside, a crisp winter chill greeted him.

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

## ARMS OF JESUS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sam?” she protested.

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

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

“More a bull than ox.... Yeah. Like a bull...a raging, out-of-control Pamplona bull,” he

added, using his fingers to imitate horns.

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

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

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

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

“Of course.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Empty,” she insisted.

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

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

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

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

“Go on, Joy. I’m listening.”

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

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

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

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

“*Little one,*’ he said, ‘*your faith has made you whole.*’ Then he kissed me on the forehead

and walked me back toward the same light. I didn't want to go back, but realized I must.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's wrong?" Joy asked.

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

"I promise."



## REGRETS

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

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

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

"Mrs. Robertson?"

"Yes?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They're prepping him as we speak."

"Will you do the surgery?"

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

Joy appeared momentarily confused, gesturing for him to continue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joy patted his arm. “No, that’s fine. I’ll be okay. I do believe. It will turn out according to

God's will," she sniffled. "Thank you. I feel better talking to you. Is there another waiting area closer to the operating room?"

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

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

...

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

"Don't you even believe he lived?"

"I'm not that stupid," he huffed. "Of course, I believe he lived. The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming."

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

"It's practically my only day off," he pled.

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

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

"What do you mean by '...missing a day here or there'? You've been all of two times in six months."

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

"You are so sacrilegious!" she fumed.

"No, I'm just not so sacrosanct. I just don't happen to believe..." he cut his remark short,

inserting in its place his favorite expletive.

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

He rolled his eyes in exasperation.

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

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

Joy refused to be baited.

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

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

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

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

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

“You hear me out,” she demanded, pulling away from him. “It’s funny how many men go hunting for God with a gun and a rod and reel in hand. Michael Sr. was killed on an iced-over highway in Wyoming out ‘hunting for God,’ while I was home taking our little boy to church. You

have no idea how let down I felt by that,” tearfully adding, “I won’t buy into that macho nonsense again!”

...

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

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

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

## NEAR DEATH

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

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

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

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

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

...

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

No answer, just a smile from his escort.

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

to himself as they passed through the open door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mingling with the forest green were carpets of lawn so finely trimmed as to make the most

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anxious to solve the riddle of his baffling surroundings, Sam scuttled up the steep rise that

lay before him. He moved forward seeking where the voices came from. Reaching its crest, his eyes set upon a small cluster of brick dwellings, clean and whitewashed but definitely of third-world styles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look around you. What do you see?" his host answered as he began now cleansing Sam's

feet with the same water-filled gourd, drying them with the same robe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Okay,” Sam replied, his gaze following the flight of the man’s outstretched arm. “I’m looking. Now what?” He turned to face the sturdily built man, but he had vanished. “Hello? Hey! This isn’t funny anymore!” he called to the air around him.

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

*Seek for one Cleopas, husband of Mary, a disciple and one of those called to assist the*

*twelve. Grant him an interview, and also his request. You may yet be healed, Samuel. To return to your beloved Joy you must first make your report to a world in desperate need of healing.*

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

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

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

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

**Here ends the SNEAK PEEK of THE CHRIST REPORT!**

eBook and Print publishing announcement coming from author, James Michael Pratt at his website and via email: [www.jamesmichaelpratt.com](http://www.jamesmichaelpratt.com)