

## CHAPTER NINE

The glow of neon-lit alcohol advertisements reflected off dark pavement glistening with the residue of an early evening shower. The illuminated signs peered through the windows of Irvine's most prosperous liquor store, the one closest to the college campus. A bell chimed, and the store's front door opened into the street, allowing Eric to exit with his latest bottle of scotch. He headed down the sidewalk with the intention of using a libation to sooth the anxiety he felt over his father's latest maneuver.

A honking horn shook him from his thoughts, and he saw an older model Camry with headlights dimmed by age come to a stop several feet behind him. The driver's side window lowered, and Kathy leaned out with a smile. "Do you have plans tonight? Other than drinking yourself into oblivion?"

It was a pleasant surprise and he walked up to the car. "What do you have in mind?"

"There's someone I'd like you to meet." She glanced at the bag in his hand with the neck of a bottle sticking out of it. "That is...if you're willing to spare your liver a night of abuse."

Maybe she wanted him to meet one of her relatives, or someone else near and dear to her. He liked the thought of it. He heard of girls like that but never dated any. They insisted on introducing guys to people they were closest to before agreeing to a date...kind of like a

screening committee. Confident that his prospects took a turn for the better, he climbed into the car.

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Alten sat behind the desk in his office wearing a smug look, like a battle commander in complete control. He turned to Tom, who occupied a wooden chair and tried to keep his heart from beating out of his chest. “Take notes.”

Tom rummaged through his professional looking, though out of style, brief case as Sarah served a glass of wine to Dr. Thomas Carne, who sat on the leather couch. Dr. Carne was a world renowned teacher, author, and atheist. Much of his scalp appeared through thin, receding hair. His face was oval shaped, and his stomach protruded in a manner common to middle-aged men.

Alten started the discussion. “Would you please explain why the Bible is not a reliable document?”

“It contradicts itself,” said Dr. Carne.

Tom never heard this before. He never read the Bible either. As he scribbled notes, he paid close attention.

“Could you elaborate?”

“Let’s take the Resurrection story,” replied Dr. Carne. “It’s full of discrepancies. What was the last thing Jesus said on the cross? The gospels give us three different answers. Who buried Jesus? Matthew says it was Joseph of Arimathea. In the book of Acts, Paul claims it was the Jews. How many women visited the tomb on Easter morning? John says it was one, Matthew two, Mark three and Luke claims there were even more than that. How many messengers did the women see at the tomb? Matthew and Mark say it was one. Luke and John believe it was two.

Then there is the question of whether the messengers were men or angels. Was the tomb already open when the women arrived? Matthew says no. Mark, Luke, and John say yes.”

Tom stared at Dr. Carne, his pen motionless with its tip on the notepad. “Eric’s primary source is flawed?”

Dr. Carne laughed. “That’s one way of looking at it. I’ve mentioned less than half of the Resurrection discrepancies. Do you want more?”

Tom nodded, feeling less nervous and more excited.

“Did the women tell the disciples what they saw at the tomb? Matthew and Luke said yes. Mark said no. John said Mary Magdalene cried when she saw Jesus’ empty tomb, but Matthew wrote that the women were ‘filled with joy.’ Did Mary Magdalene recognize Jesus when she saw him? Matthew said she did. Luke and John said she didn’t. Could Jesus’ followers touch him after the Resurrection? John said they could not, but the other gospels said they could. And on and on...but by now I think you get the point.”

“Yeah, I think so.” Tom tried to write down what he could remember of the man’s explanation.

Alten glanced at Tom. “The defense...” He shifted his gaze to Dr. Carne. “...will claim that the Bible’s contradictions are in minor details.”

“The gospels tend to agree on the larger issues...punishment, death, resurrection, that sort of thing,” Dr. Carne admitted. “But they’re clearly not telling the same story.”

“I’m sorry, but...” Tom looked around uncomfortably. He was sure to be rebuked for asking his next question, but he needed to know the answer. “What...uh...what do you mean when you say ‘gospels’?”

Silence and three surprised looks greeted his inquiry. He braced himself for some sort of chastisement, but Alten surprised him with a chuckle. “You haven’t spent much time in church, have you?”

“No, sir.”

“The word gospel means good news,” explained Dr. Carne. “It refers to writings about the life of Jesus. In antiquity, there were many of these books by many different authors, but the Christian church only recognizes the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.”

“But you also mentioned Paul.”

“Paul became a Christian after Jesus was already dead. His writings became the blueprint to spread the gospel message to the non-Jewish world.”

Alten smiled. “You have five different writers telling the same stories, but they contradict each other. There is no way the defense can get around that.”

“Don’t we have to reveal this in discovery?” Tom asked.

“I don’t think we need to worry about revealing the...*minor details*.” Alten appeared even more confident than he had at the beginning of the meeting.

Emboldened by his haughtiness, Tom straightened up in his chair and assumed a more self-assured posture.

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A forty-foot-tall geodesic greenhouse stood less than an hour’s drive outside the city. Semi-spherical in shape, it radiated lavender lighting while its polycarbonate panels projected a silver glow against the dark, star-dotted night. The half-dome appeared to grow out of the earth like a blister on smooth skin.

Eric and Kathy passed through an arch-shaped atrium to enter the greenhouse. A foggy mist met them, hovering around lush plants and morning glory flowers. Lilies, lilacs, tulips, and roses also bloomed in the sea of verdant leaves, irrespective of their natural growing seasons. An elaborate misting system stretched like fingers throughout the greenhouse to feed the foliage and flowers. Crickets played their nocturnal melodies while tiny birds darted from plant to plant, perched on the edge of a water tank and streaked along the structure's round roof.

Doug Palmeter, a gray-haired man in his mid-seventies, appeared from behind a wall of vegetation, carrying metal snips and a bouquet of clipped vines.

"Eric, this is Doug Palmeter, a friend and retired reverend."

Rev. Palmeter shifted the vines to his left hand and offered his right to Eric. "You must be the young man with the questions."

Shooting a curious look at Kathy, Eric shook the reverend's outstretched hand. This wasn't the kind of person he expected her to introduce him to, but that was okay. He could roll with it. "I found the answers to some of my questions already, but I still can't understand why the Bible authors don't agree with each other."

"Could it simply be a matter of perspective?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kathy.

"They were writing at different times, for different audiences. Why would they each include the same details?"

"Because they're telling the same story," said Eric.

"Consider this...Matthew said there was one angel at Jesus' tomb. John claimed there were two. Mark said there was a young man at the tomb, and Luke wrote there were two men."

"That's what I mean."

“For the sake of argument, let’s assume there were two angels, like John said. Matthew and Mark only mentioned the one who spoke, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t another one present.”

“Okay,” replied Eric. “Angels. But Mark and Luke said they were men.”

“Did you read what Mark and Luke wrote? They said the *men* were dressed in brilliant white and brought a message from God. I don’t know about you, but it sure sounds to me like they were describing angels.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense.”

“If it’s plausible, you can’t say it’s not accurate. The burden of proof is on the skeptics.”

Kathy could see Eric wasn’t entirely convinced. “Tell him about Judas.”

“Judas?” asked Eric.

“Matthew wrote that Judas hanged himself after he betrayed Jesus,” said the reverend.

“Yeah. I think I read that.”

“But Luke said he fell in a field, his body burst open, and all his intestines spilled out.”

“Oh...that’s a good example,” said Eric. “How can anyone say those two accounts describe the same event?”

“It might go something like this...Judas hanged himself. After his body decomposed in the hot sun, it broke away from the rope and ruptured when it hit the ground, causing his intestines to spill out. Would that be reasonable?”

An understanding smile crossed Eric’s face. “You have more of these examples, don’t you?”

The reverend nodded.

“But how do we prove it?” asked Eric. “Do we have enough information?”

Rev. Palmeter led them beneath a vegetation-covered trellis. Vines, leafy plants, buds, and tiny flowers coated it. The flowers gave off a perfumed scent that mixed with the mist in the air to make them feel like they passed through a garden paradise. Glow from the half-dome's lavender surface lights seeped through gaps in the trellis's canopy of green.

Kathy absorbed the ambiance as if it was a part of her being, like she finally found her home. But Eric looked around in awe, a visitor in a strange and beautiful land.

Continuing their discussion, Rev. Palmeter said, "We have seven ancient copies of Plato's works and five copies of Aristotle. Is that enough to prove their existence and philosophies, Eric?"

With a bit of effort, Eric redirected his attention back to the reverend. "Um...yeah. I don't think anyone would argue that."

"What about Jesus?" asked Kathy.

"Right," said Eric. "How many copies of his stuff?"

Rev. Palmeter removed a dead leaf from an otherwise lively plant. "Not five or seven. We have over twenty-four thousand ancient copies of the New Testament. Twenty-four thousand."

Eric couldn't help but drop his mouth slightly. *Twenty-four thousand compared to only five and seven?*

Kathy looked from Eric to the reverend. "So what happened to Jesus meant more to ancient people than the works of Aristotle or Plato?"

The reverend stopped before a door at the end of the trellis. "That's right." He opened it to a round, well-lit chamber and gestured for Eric and Kathy to enter.

The greenhouse's round room was an off-shoot of the main structure. It stood at a height of twenty feet. Like the rest of the half-dome, polycarbonate panels made up its construction, supported by brackets of steel and Douglas-fir. Glass cases filled with butterflies, and foliage lined the walls, encircling the room.

Eric and Kathy walked down an aisle surrounded by potted saplings and cultivated bushes. A monarch butterfly with orange and black markings fluttered casually between them and settled on a heart-leaf milkweed growing out of a basin tub near the entrance.

Rev. Palmeter opened the glass case to his immediate right. "Here's the significance of the Resurrection."

Following his lead, Eric and Kathy approached the case. They saw a caterpillar crawling up a green stalk. The creature had long, spikey hairs and black, yellow, and white bands extending length-wise over its body.

"See this little guy?" Rev. Palmeter ran his finger gently along the back of the caterpillar, causing it to curl. "He represents us, the average person."

Eric never thought of himself as a caterpillar but tried his best to go along with Rev. Palmeter's demonstration. He watched the reverend point to a cocoon affixed to a high-hanging branch. The tiny pod was gray, wrinkled, and sealed at both ends, like a zipped-up sleeping bag.

"The cocoon represents our death...the end for us."

The reverend's illustration was clearly nothing new to Kathy, but she watched for Eric's reaction.

"The Resurrection was a triumph over death. Anyone who believes it will be transformed..." Rev. Palmeter pointed to dozens of butterflies, their wings painted with intricate designs and color schemes. The delicate creatures fluttered around flowers growing from plants



situated in the upper right corner of the case. "...into a new, beautiful creature that has no end, no death."

Eric watched the butterflies frolic about the top of the case and thought for a brief moment that it would be nice to be one of them. They were beautiful, graceful, and peaceful. "Sounds like a miracle."

Kathy smiled broadly, unable and unwilling to hide her joy over his observation.

"The greatest miracle." The reverend walked back toward the door. "But there are others." He flipped a switch.

Rev. Palmeter left the room as lights dimmed and cases along the wall opened in unison. Several thousand butterflies escaped their confines to swarm the center of the chamber. They encircled Eric and Kathy, fluttering around them in a funnel of soft wings and vibrant hues. It was as if the gentle creatures welcomed them into their community, causing the concerns of their lives to evaporate with each flicker of gossamer wings.

Eric slipped his arm around Kathy's waist. Their eyes locked with magnificent colors swirling like a kaleidoscope in their peripheral vision. The moment was so surreal and transformative that a kiss could actually cheapen it. They let themselves fall into the embrace of nature's beautiful organisms and enjoyed the lingering sensations of euphoria.