

EUODOO

Prologue

Is it strange how, after enough years have passed, certain moments begin to stand out with remarkable clarity while everything else slowly fades into the background of memory.

Looking back now, I can see there were moments that quietly changed the course of my life. They didn't announce themselves with dramatic revelations or life-changing events. Most seemed ordinary at the time. They unfolded so gradually that I hardly noticed them until one day I realized I was no longer seeing the world the way I once had.

Even as a child, I sensed there was more to reality than what could be seen or measured. I can't explain why. It was simply there—a persistent feeling that life was deeper than it appeared.

I've never claimed to understand it.

I still don't.

This is my story towards Faith, and ultimately Jesus.

Chapter One

The College years

Many years ago, I attended a small community college in the Pacific Northwest, nestled among towering evergreens near the town of Steilacoom.

Like most young people, I wasn't there because I had a clear vision for my future. College simply seemed like the next logical step after high school. I took classes because everyone expected me to, not because I knew where they were leading.

Most of them came and went without leaving much of an impression.

One class didn't.

It was philosophy.

My parents never understood my fascination with it. Whenever I mentioned the class, I could almost predict the response.

"You'll starve."

To them, philosophy wasn't a career. It was an expensive hobby—something people studied if they had no intention of making a living.

Maybe they were right.

Looking back, I realize some of the questions my philosophy professor asked stayed with me far longer than any of the answers.

At the time, I didn't know that.

I often left class wondering what he had really meant. His lectures always seemed to point toward something just beyond my understanding. I couldn't explain it, but I knew there was something I was missing.

College itself was an odd place. It had a way of attracting people who were still trying to figure themselves out. Many of us skipped class whenever we thought we could get away with it. We rearranged our schedules around convenience instead of responsibility.

Some of my friends came from backgrounds much like mine. Others seemed to have grown up in entirely different worlds. Somehow, we all ended up in the same classrooms, asking many of the same questions.

The truth was, we were still kids.

I didn't know it at the time but I was seeking answers to questions that plagued me constantly;

Why are things the way they are?

Why do people believe what they believe?

Why does one culture value something another dismisses?

Before long, those questions stopped being academic.

They became personal.

Who am I?

Why am I here?

Where am I going?

Despite all of that, I found solace in one particular place, the park.

Whenever I left campus to head home, I often cut through a park that bordered the college. The land dropped away into hills and ravines covered with towering evergreens, dense

brush, and thick undergrowth. It was peaceful there. The moment I stepped beneath the trees, the sounds of the campus faded behind me.

There was something about that place that settled my mind. It offered a different reality from the one I experienced in classrooms and crowded hallways. Away from the conversations, deadlines, and distractions, I could simply think.

The park became the place where I wrestled with the questions that had followed me for as long as I could remember.

The cool autumn air seemed to invite those questions. The soft hum of insects, the scent of damp earth, and the filtered light drifting through the towering evergreens created an atmosphere unlike anywhere else. Time seemed to slow beneath the forest canopy, and I could walk for hours without realizing how much of the afternoon had slipped away.

On one particular afternoon, after another philosophy class, I wandered into the park as I had done so many times before.

I wasn't looking for anything.

I wasn't expecting anything.

I simply started down a familiar trail.

It turned out it wasn't going to be just another walk through the woods.

As I wandered through the park, admiring the openness of the landscape and the beauty surrounding me, I noticed something I was almost certain had never been there before.

At first, I dismissed it.

Perhaps it was simply the afternoon light striking a small ravine at a different angle. Maybe it reminded me of something buried deep in my memory. Or perhaps I was imagining the whole thing.

Whatever it was, I sensed it before I actually saw it.

It was difficult to explain.

Just an anomaly, I told myself. Nothing more than light playing tricks on my eyes.

So I kept walking.

Yet every few steps, I found myself looking back.

As I drew even with the ravine, something else caught my attention.

There was a large tree.

At first, I assumed it was another Douglas fir like the countless others scattered throughout the park. But something about this one was different. I couldn't explain what it was. It wasn't larger than the others, nor did it stand apart because of its shape.

It simply had a presence.

I found myself drawn toward it.

Have you ever experienced something like that? A place that quietly calls to you without making a sound?

It was strange.

My first instinct, as always, was to call out.

"Hello?"

"Anybody there?" Nothing.

Not even an echo.

Still, something urged me to leave the trail and make my way toward that forgotten part of the park—a place I had never bothered to explore before.

I started down into the ravine.

The hillside was steeper than it had looked from the trail. Loose dirt shifted beneath my feet, and tangled roots reached across the narrow path like hidden fingers.

Then, without warning, I lost my footing.

I've fallen plenty of times in my life, but this wasn't like any ordinary fall.

Instead of crashing through brush and rocks, it felt as though I were being gently carried—almost comfortably rolled—down the hillside.

That was the moment I knew something wasn't right.

Scene Two — The Voice in the Forest

As I finally came to a stop, I quickly checked myself for broken bones. Years of martial arts training had taught me how to fall with minimal injury, but I also knew how easily things could go sideways.

"Good... nothing broken," I muttered.

I couldn't help feeling frustrated that this had actually happened. If something like this happened to me today, I probably wouldn't have walked away unscathed. Thank God I was flexible enough back then.

I stood and brushed bits of grass, weeds, and leaves from my clothes. Once I had gathered myself, I looked around.

Almost immediately, I realized this wasn't the park I knew.

Something was different.

The air felt thicker.

The trees were unfamiliar.

Every rustle of leaves and every distant sound seemed unnaturally clear.

"Where am I?" I wondered.

Then I heard it.

It wasn't an inner voice or something I imagined. It was unmistakably audible—deep, rich, and strangely reassuring.

"MEVAKESH..."

"What? Who's there?" I stammered. "Welcome..."

I slowly turned, scanning the trees around me.

Who was speaking?

All I could see were towering firs and dense undergrowth.

Unless...

No.

That couldn't be right.

Could it?

I looked again.

Yes.

It had to be one of the trees.

But which one?

Oddly enough, I didn't have to search for long. My eyes settled on a large fir standing behind a cluster of smaller trees.

Don't ask me how I knew.

I simply knew.

Cautiously, I made my way toward it.

"Okay," I said. "Who are you? Or better yet... what are you? And why are you talking to me?" The moment the words left my mouth, I felt ridiculous.

I was standing in the middle of an unfamiliar forest... talking to a tree.

Yet something deep inside urged me to continue.

"I am called Aggelos... a messenger. We met a long time ago... in another time and another land. You probably don't remember... but I was with you... always." I stood frozen.

The words stole the breath from my lungs.

For a long moment, I couldn't speak.

Finally, one word escaped.

"Really?"

What a stupid response, I thought.

"Where?"

"When?"

"How?"

That was the moment everything became impossible.

The massive tree slowly turned toward me.

It leaned forward ever so slightly...

...and opened its eyes.

Eyes.

My heart nearly stopped.

Then its mouth slowly formed into a gentle smile.

It had a mouth.

I am losing my mind.

"Whoa..." I stammered. "Hey... what's going on here?" The ancient tree regarded me calmly.

"Do not be afraid. It is not what you believe you see that is real, but rather what you know you see that is..recall the Ruins of Rome." I blinked.

That's about as cryptic as it gets.

"You're going to have to explain that one," I said, shaking my head. "Because none of this is making any sense."

Scene Three — Questions for the Tree

The buzzing in my head grew noticeably louder. At that moment, I needed answers more than I needed a way out of there.

"All right, Mr. Tree—or whatever you are—why are you talking to me? And what the heck have you been waiting for?"

"It's not about waiting for you," the tree replied, "but waiting for the right moment. You see, we have been with you throughout your journey. Even when you believed you were alone—in your darkest moments and in your highest highs—we were there."

"Listen, I don't even know what that means. Let's get something straight. I'm a realist. I don't believe in tooth fairies or unicorns, and right now that's exactly what this feels like—a bad bump on the head that's giving me one incredible hallucination." I slowly circled the tree, trying to find whoever was behind the voice.

There was no one.

"Okay, then answer me this. Who is 'we'? And if you were there through all those moments, why didn't you stop the bad ones? Why didn't you make yourselves known during the good

ones? Maybe then I could've understood why I kept making such a mess of things." The ancient tree remained silent.

Not evasive.

Patient.

As though my questions deserved time to settle before they were answered.

I sat down on a weathered stone, unable to shake the feeling that something inside me had already begun to change.

The forest grew strangely quiet. Even the breeze that had stirred the branches only moments before seemed to withdraw, as though the world itself were waiting.

Aggelos stood motionless.

He did not speak.

He simply watched me.

My thoughts drifted back to something he had said earlier.

"The ruins of Rome."

The words echoed through my mind with an unsettling familiarity.

I knew that phrase.

Not because I had studied Roman history or visited ancient ruins, but because it awakened something buried so deeply within me that I could almost feel it struggling to reach the surface.

A faint pressure settled behind my eyes, I couldn't fight the overwhelming drowsiness..I closed my eyes...darkness

Scene Four — The Ruins of Rome

I closed my eyes for only a moment.

When I opened them again, the forest was gone.

Or perhaps more accurately... it had become something else.

The colors hadn't disappeared. They dissolved into ribbons of light that flowed around me like water. The scent of cedar faded, replaced by dry earth warmed beneath an afternoon sun.

Somewhere in the distance, children were laughing.

The laughter...

I knew it.

Not because I recognized the voices, but because I recognized the feeling.

It belonged to another time.

Another place.

Another life I had somehow forgotten.

The stone beneath me was no longer damp with moss.

It was warm.

Rough beneath my hands.

Dust clung to my fingertips.

Slowly—almost reluctantly—I lifted my eyes.

Broken columns rose beneath a brilliant blue sky.

Weathered arches stretched across a distant hillside.

Fragments of ancient walls lay scattered among tall grasses as though the earth had been patiently reclaiming them for centuries.

Then I understood.

I wasn't imagining this.

I wasn't dreaming.

I was remembering.

It was 1966.

Izmir, Turkey.

Back then, my imagination had no fences.

Our apartment overlooked a world that seemed built for adventure. Izmir—known in ancient times as Smyrna, one of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation—was filled with forgotten places waiting to be discovered.

At least, that's how it looked through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy.

Ruins seemed to hide everywhere.

Even in our own backyard.

Broken walls disappeared beneath vines. Ancient stones emerged from the earth as though history itself had grown tired of remaining buried.

To me, every forgotten corner promised treasure.

Every pile of rocks concealed a secret.

Every afternoon became another expedition.

And I loved every minute of it.

As twilight settled over the neighborhood, long shadows stretched across the hills behind our apartment. If you knew where to look, you could make your way to an ancient Roman pool lined with marble, almost completely swallowed by vines and brush.

As darkness approached, hundreds of fruit bats would burst from the trees, filling the evening sky with their screeches as they disappeared into the night.

Now, if you're a ten-year-old boy who loves Frankenstein and Dracula movies, classic comics, novels, that's about the greatest thing you've ever seen.

We didn't own a television, and trips to the theater were rare, so my imagination supplied everything Hollywood couldn't.

I thought it was fantastic.

One afternoon I fashioned a makeshift slingshot from a rubber band and bent a handful of paperclips into ammunition. I stood beside the old pool launching them into the sky, hoping against all odds that I'd actually hit one of those bats.

Wouldn't you know it...

I did.

The poor creature spiraled into the pool below.

Naturally, I fished it out.

I examined it carefully.

"Yep," I concluded.

"That's Dracula."

Satisfied with my scientific investigation, I left him where he was and proudly headed home.

It was a great adventure.

Yep...

one that belonged entirely to me.

You may be wondering what any of this has to do with the ruins of Rome.

I'm getting there.

One afternoon, beneath another impossibly clear Turkish sky, I decided to explore the overgrown area behind our apartment. Vines covered everything. Trees and brush had reclaimed whatever had once stood there.

Nothing about it suggested danger.

Carefully, I stepped onto what I assumed was a tangled layer of branches resting over an old stone wall.

It wasn't.

Without warning, the ground disappeared beneath me.

Scene Five — Beneath the Ruins

I hit the dirt floor flat on my back.

The air exploded from my lungs.

For a few terrifying moments, I couldn't breathe.

This is worse than when that horse threw me, I thought.

I hated that animal.

Slowly my senses returned.

I turned my head.

Something drew my eyes toward the darkness beside me.

Massive stone columns.

Three...

perhaps four of them.

Some had broken in half.

Others still leaned against what remained of ancient walls.

They weren't especially tall.

But they were enormous.

Time itself seemed to rest upon them.

The dirt beneath me was cool and damp—not muddy, but the kind of earth you'd expect inside a cave or an ancient dwelling left untouched for centuries.

Oddly enough, I don't remember how I got out.

Whether I climbed... crawled... or simply found another opening... that part has long since disappeared from memory.

I only know that I did.

But something else happened down there.

Something far more important than the fall itself.

From that day forward, I was never quite the same.

Not dramatically.

I didn't suddenly become wiser.

Or braver.

Instead, something quietly shifted deep inside me.

I stopped believing life was merely a series of random coincidences.

I began to suspect there was purpose woven into the world.

And if purpose existed...

then there had to be a Mind behind it.

Someone... or Something... had intended all of this.

I didn't have the answers.

But for the first time...

I knew the questions were worth pursuing, I began to understand a 'greater purpose' in my life.

Scene Six — The Ritual

I carried those questions with me for years.

What being—or what power—had intervened beneath those ancient ruins?

The massive stone columns had fallen only inches from where my head had landed.

By every reasonable expectation, I should have cracked my head wide open.

Yet somehow...

I hadn't.

Another question troubled me even more.

Why would a power capable of preserving my life care about an ordinary ten-year-old boy?

Those questions quietly followed me as I continued exploring the forgotten places surrounding our apartment.

Then came another experience I would never forget.

One afternoon, my brother and I were standing near the entrance to our apartment building when we heard an unusual commotion just beyond the front steps. A crowd had gathered, and curiosity quickly drew us toward it.

As outsiders—two American boys living in Turkey—we eased our way through the gathering until we could finally see what everyone was watching.

The building's caretaker, who also owned the neighborhood butcher shop, appeared to be conducting some kind of ceremony.

At least, that's what it looked like to me.

Several men erected a simple four-post frame. Bound beneath it was a large, dark brown ram, its legs tied securely with rope. The animal bleated loudly, struggling against its restraints.

Something was about to happen.

Something both fascinating...

and terrifying.

The men lifted the ram by its bound legs while the caretaker began chanting in Turkish. I couldn't understand a single word, but the cadence carried a weight that felt ancient.

The crowd pressed closer.

Without hesitation, the caretaker drew a large knife.

Then, in one swift motion, he cut the animal's throat.

I froze.

I had never seen anything like it.

The ram cried out as a large silver bowl was placed beneath its neck to catch the flowing blood. I remember staring into its eyes, convinced—even at my young age—that it somehow understood what was happening.

The chanting continued.

Blood splattered across the ground.

Women dressed in black joined the prayers.

Men of every age watched in solemn silence.

When the animal finally grew still, the ceremony was only beginning.

The caretaker carried the bowl of blood to the entrance of our apartment building and began sprinkling it across the doorway, the walls, and the front of his butcher shop.

The crowd answered with more chanting.

Only then did it dawn on me.

This wasn't simply butchering an animal.

This was worship.

This was ritual.

Something ancient.

Something sacred to the people standing around me.

Although I couldn't understand the language, I understood that I was witnessing traditions that had survived for centuries.

Perhaps even millennia.

Afterward, the ram was lowered to the ground and carefully skinned.

I couldn't bring myself to watch much of that part.

Instead, I noticed what happened next.

The meat was divided among those who had gathered.

Families received portions.

Travelers received portions.

Working men received portions.

Everyone seemed grateful.

Everyone...

except the ram.

The caretaker glanced toward my brother and me.

For a brief moment, our eyes met, I recognized something old, ancient.

Then he quietly returned to his work.

Years later, after reading the Old Testament for the first time, memories of that afternoon returned with startling clarity.

The sacrificial system described in Scripture was no longer an abstract idea confined to ancient pages.

I had witnessed something remarkably similar with my own eyes.

That childhood experience didn't answer my questions.

It gave me more of them.

But it also taught me something I have never forgotten.

Ancient rituals were not myths.

They were living traditions, carried from one generation to the next by people who believed they were participating in something far greater than themselves.

Looking back now, I can see that experiences like these were quietly preparing me for a journey I didn't yet know I was taking.

Toward faith.

Toward truth.

Toward the One who had been pursuing me long before I ever began searching for Him, could this be what Aggelos meant when he said... 'We have been with you all along...' my mind replayed that... did it happen at all.

CHAPTER TWO

Scene One — Back to Reality

Suddenly, I snapped back to reality.

I was still standing in the middle of that strange forest, carrying on a conversation with...
...a tree?

I had absolutely no idea what had just happened. My mind didn't feel like my own anymore, and this place somehow felt both unfamiliar and strangely familiar at the same time.

I looked around.

Nothing.

The forest had grown quiet again.

A gentle breeze stirred the branches overhead as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Aggelos..." I called cautiously.

Nothing.

"...or whatever you call yourself... are you still here?" Silence.

"Oh, man..."

I rubbed my forehead.

"I've officially crossed over into the Twilight Zone."

I laughed nervously, hoping the sound of my own voice would make everything seem normal again.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered. "I'm imagining all of this." Still no response.

"Okay... well..."

I shifted my backpack onto my shoulder.

"I'm gonna get on my way now."

I hesitated, feeling more than a little foolish for saying goodbye to a tree. "So..."

I shrugged.

"...if you're still listening..." "...thanks for the memories." I waited.

Part of me expected one of the branches to wave goodbye.

Maybe a leaf would drift dramatically to the ground.

At the very least... a little tree nod.

Nothing.

Just an ordinary tree standing quietly in an ordinary forest.

I brushed the dirt from my clothes and began climbing out of the ravine.

By the time I reached the top, my breathing had settled, and my mind had already begun searching for logical explanations.

Stress.

Fatigue.

Maybe I'd hit my head harder than I realized.

Maybe I'd dreamed the whole conversation.

I took a few more steps.

Something made me stop.

I turned for one last look.

From where I stood, there was nothing remarkable about the ravine anymore.

No glowing light.

No mysterious voice.

No ancient messenger.

Just another stretch of forest.

Yet something inside me resisted walking away.

Not because I expected to see Aggelos again...

but because I had the strange feeling I was leaving a place I somehow knew, one that would help me to answer the questions plaguing my soul.

Eventually, I turned back toward the trail.

"Stranger things have happened," I muttered.

"Probably just bumped my head." It sounded reasonable enough.

My mind eagerly accepted every explanation it could invent.

Anyone could stumble into old Roman ruins.

Anyone could witness an ancient ritual.

Anyone could imagine a talking tree after taking a hard fall.

My head was willing to believe every one of those explanations.

My heart wasn't.

It had been marked by a question that refused to leave me.

That night I stumbled into my room and sat quietly, trying to make sense of everything that had happened—not just in the forest, but throughout the entire day.

"Man..."

I sighed.

"I wish I had someone to tell."

I sat there for a long time before finally admitting to myself that nobody would ever believe what had happened.

...or would they?

I started running through the names of people I knew.

Friends.

Classmates.

Family.

How exactly do you begin a conversation like that?

"Hey... I was hiking today and had a conversation with a tree that showed me memories from my childhood." Yeah...

that ought to go over well.

I laughed to myself.

No.

This one I'd keep to myself.

At least for now.

I've always enjoyed being around people. If there was a project to tackle, a team to join, or an adventure waiting somewhere over the next hill, I usually wanted to be part of it.

I've never thought of myself as much of a leader.

More of a team player.

Funny thing is, though, many of history's greatest leaders never went looking for the role.

George Washington comes to mind.

From everything I've read, he wasn't campaigning to become the father of a nation.

History simply found him.

I certainly wasn't looking to become the central character in... whatever this was.

If this strange journey had truly begun... who in the world would I invite along?

Who would willingly follow me into a forest to search for talking trees?

Who would believe there were answers hidden beneath forgotten ruins, mysterious symbols, and memories that refused to stay buried?

The more I thought about it, the more impossible it all seemed.

Eventually, one question blended into another until I couldn't tell where one ended and the next began.

Sometime during the night, exhaustion finally won.

I drifted into a restless sleep...

still wondering whether tomorrow would bring answers... or simply more questions.

Scene Two — The Symbol

The next morning I gathered my books and headed back to campus.

Same old routine.

Meeting friends in the commons.

Wasting time between classes.

Sowing my youthful oats, as they say.

Before long I found myself settling into my philosophy class. I pulled out a chair, glanced around at the familiar faces, and waited for the day's lecture to begin.

Symbology — What and Why

Interesting topic, I thought.

Especially after everything that had happened in the forest.

Almost immediately my thoughts drifted back to Aggelos.

No, I told myself. That's just a coincidence.

I forced my attention back to the front of the room.

Our professor slowly paced across the classroom before beginning.

"Symbolism has been one of humanity's greatest dialects from antiquity to the present day.

Our modern methods of communication are saturated with symbols. Nike. Beats. The Chicago Bulls. Every one of them uses imagery to create identity, loyalty, and ultimately respect—sometimes even to the detriment of those who do not understand what those symbols truly represent." Wow...

That's a mouthful.

Some of it made sense.

But to the detriment...?

I wasn't so sure about that.

Then— FLASH!

An image exploded into my mind.

A strange symbol.

Etched into the side of the tree.

Aggelos.

Wait...

What?

I jerked open my notebook and began scribbling frantically.

No...

That wasn't it.

I tried again.

Still wrong.

Again.

Closer...

Then suddenly...

I froze.

I had it.

"GOT IT!" I blurted, louder than I intended.

The room fell silent.

Every head turned toward me.

The professor lowered his glasses and smiled. "I'm glad you got it, Mr. Garofalo. Now... may I continue?" A ripple of laughter swept through the classroom.

I hardly noticed.

My eyes remained fixed on the page.

I remembered it.

The symbol.

It hadn't simply been carved into the bark.

It almost seemed... alive.

As though it wanted me to recognize it.

Yesterday I was too overwhelmed to understand what I was seeing.

Now I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I traced it again.

Then again.

And again.

What was this symbol?

Why was it carved into the side of...

...Aggelos?

Only one thought remained.

I've got to get back there.

Chapter Three

The LIBRARY

Scene 1 — The Book

I headed down the flight of stairs out of the main hallway of classes, passing cliques of kids. Something about the need to "unconform by conforming" always made me ill. I guess it's a social need at this age to rebel against established norms. Heck, in my own way I was rebelling—attempting to make sense of the tree... or Aggelos... or whatever.

Making my way out of the building, I headed toward the library—or what was passing at this college for a library. It was older than the rest of the buildings, probably left over from the original foundation. Some say it was part of the sanitarium that used to be located up the hill. Others say it was a renovated structure from the first settlers who landed in Steilacoom. Either way, I always found it to be somewhere I could escape this life.

The day was half over. The sky was starting to muster some clouds together. It's the Pacific Northwest in the fall—you know, darker than it should be, threatening to rain, with just a natural gloominess about everything.

Just like every other kid I knew, living here wasn't my choice. My Pops decided to retire from military service here, and, well... I just kinda got stuck here.

I shuffled past the single librarian, who always seemed to be studying something.

Microfiche, a book, a magazine—anyway, she always seemed busy in her own frumpy way. Gotta admire them—they make bank.

"Excuse me, Miss? Where is the section on symbolism in antiquity?"

Boy, I thought that sounded like a mouthful, but I had heard the professor mention those big words in class.

"Shhhhh."

She simply pointed toward the second floor without looking up.

"Thanks... I guess."

I frowned and headed toward the stairs.

Creak... creak...

Man, these stairs were old. Hope nobody falls through and ends up suing the school. Anyway... not my concern.

As I reached the second landing, muted sunlight streamed through the only window on the floor. It looked tired and old, just like everything else up here. They should've condemned this place years ago when they started adding new buildings to the campus.

Oh well... not my concern.

"Antiquities..." Got it.

The shelf was marked—looked like somebody had written it with crayon or something. "Symbolism..." Ah... there.

But there wasn't anything there.

Just an empty section.

"What the heck is wrong with this library? Can't they keep the inventory straight?" I muttered aloud.

Then I paused.

At the very end of the last row sat a single old book, partially pulled from the shelf.

Looking back...

I should have never let my curiosity get the better of me.

I should've looked away.

This was going to become the changing moment of my life.

I felt it in my soul.

"HEY, DUDE!"

My head jerked around, hoping it wasn't someone—or something—I knew.

"Whatcha doing?" Nixon.

Out of nowhere this guy barges into my space, breaking up my me time and just generally being annoying. "I should smack you." I gritted my teeth.

"Dude, don't ever walk up on me like that again. You're gonna get hurt."

"Ah, relax, soldier. It's all good. Anyway, I saw you trucking out after class and wanted to catch up with ya. Cool?" It was John.

What could I do?

"Yeah... sure. Just be quiet. That lady downstairs seems kinda edgy."

I kept my eye on the book while talking to him and slowly shuffled toward the last shelf.

Gently, I pulled the book free.

I cradled it in my hands.

My fingers rubbed across the worn leather, feeling the familiar texture of something that had lived a long life.

I glanced at the binding.

Nothing.

No author's name.

No publisher.

No date.

Just strange illustrations pressed into the leather with faded gold leaf.

"Dude... look at this."

"It has to be a hundred years old. Who would've put something like this here... in this old building?" The book was old.

Real old.

Green weathered leather with dark maroon lettering, deeply embossed across the cover.

MEVAKESH.

I whispered the word to myself.

"Me...va...kesh."

I didn't understand it.

But something inside me did.

It felt strangely familiar...

Almost as though I'd heard it before.

"Wonder what this means..."

John grabbed the book and started bending the binding.

"HEY!"

I nearly shouted.

"Cut it out!"

"It's just a book. Real spooky... relax."

John laughed, trying to lighten the moment, but he could tell I wasn't having any of it.

"It's important," I stammered.

"Don't ask me how I know..."

I just know."

I carefully opened the cover.

"Look..."

"It's a map."

"LOOK!"

"The forest... the college... the lake..."

"What the heck..."

"It's HERE."

"This is a map of Steilacoom... just with different names... and a whole lot of other things."

"Sure it is..."

John leaned over my shoulder for a better look.

"If it is... what's it doing inside this book?"

The map covered the inside of the front cover and continued onto the first page. Along the margin were tiny page titles and little sketches—so small they were almost impossible to make out.

"What the heck is this?"

"Maybe somebody was writing a journal... or a diary... about this place." "But why go to all the trouble of binding it? Why use expensive leather?" I slowly turned another page.

Then another.

The pages weren't printed.

They were handwritten.

Every one of them.

I stopped.

A thought settled over me so quietly it almost frightened me.

"This book..." I swallowed.

"This journal..."

"It was meant to be found."

John looked at me without saying a word.

"It wasn't hidden."

"It was waiting."

I looked back at the worn leather cover.

"This isn't just somebody's diary."

"It's someone reaching out..."

My voice faded almost to a whisper.

"...to warn somebody..."

"...or explain something..."

"...or maybe..."

I looked back down at the title.

"...to begin someone else's journey."

Scene 2

About John...

Growing up, a kid usually has three or four friends he'd call buds or buddies. More than that and you've got a gang, and we really didn't have much interest in forming one. We were just a small, reliable group of dudes with similar interests and similar tastes.

I wandered from one little circle to another, but there were only two or three guys I really enjoyed hanging around with, and one of them was John.

He was, by every stretch of the imagination, the rowdiest, most arrogant, almost narcissistic dude you'd ever meet—always boisterous, always self-assured, and most of the time... a nuisance.

But he was my John.

I could almost predict what he was going to do before he knew it himself.

I first met him in high school. Both of us were interested in the same things—sports over studies, guys over girls, and fun over work.

A perfect recipe for disaster.

All we needed was an excuse to execute.

I played every sport I could, primarily because I didn't want to go home after school. It was easier to find an excuse to stay away.

Football.

Wrestling.

Karate.

Anything that got me out of class or kept me busy afterward.

I loved it.

John, on the other hand, was more interested in the "high society" games—tennis, golf, and swimming.

I didn't go for that.

It didn't fit my pedigree.

We were blue collar all the way.

John...

Well...

He could run with the privileged crowd if he wanted to.

Maybe that's what made us so sympatico.

Every summer we'd find odd jobs just to earn enough gas money for my beat-up Volkswagen. It wasn't much of a car, and it didn't last much longer than high school, but while we had it, it was freedom.

It was our escape from the humdrumness of teenage life.

John would always say,

"One day I'm gonna make it on the circuit, man. You'll see. I'll be on ESPN swinging the clubs."

"Yeah... sure, buddy. Keep dreaming." I'd laugh.

But if anybody could've done it...

It was John.

We never left our dreams sitting on the table.

We wore them like badges around our necks...

Until they became nooses.

Holding on too long will do that to you.

Neither of us knew it then, but we were headed toward a destination that would test our friendship—and our faith in each other—more than either of us could imagine.

Looking back now...

I'm grateful it was John who was chosen to walk that journey with me.

"Hold onto your dreams, Johnny..."

"You're gonna need them."

I leafed through the pages, stopping at the images and illustrations.

"The way forward is fraught with... unexpected joy and danger..."

I let those words linger as I stared at a sketch of a castle surrounded by strange creatures.

"Wow..."

"I'm, like, lost in this thing right now."

"Wanna get out of here?" I looked over at John.

"Sure, buddy. It's creeping me out anyway." I slipped the book into my backpack.

There wasn't any way I could check it out. It didn't have an ISBN number, an author's name, or anything that suggested it belonged in a library.

It almost felt as though it had been sitting there...

Waiting for us.

I hurried past the frumpy librarian, hoping she wouldn't notice the look on our faces, and pushed through the front doors into the fading afternoon light.

"Hey, I'll catch you later," I said as we walked toward the car. "I'm gonna head home and dig into this thing. You cool?"

"Yeah," John answered. "Just drop me off at my house. I'll get a few things done and see what you've turned up tomorrow at school." The drive home passed in silence.

Neither of us had much to say.

I don't know what John was thinking...

But my mind was somewhere else entirely.

I didn't want to run into anybody when I got home.

I had a lot on my mind, and I wasn't in the mood for conversation.

"Hey! There's a letter here from school. Come and get it!" My brother's voice echoed through the house.

That was strange.

It wasn't an official envelope.

No college letterhead.

Just my name written across the front, the college address in the upper right-hand corner, and it wasn't even sealed properly.

I peeled back the flap and unfolded the letter.

It was from my philosophy professor.

Mr. Garofalo,

I was wondering if you could stop by my office tomorrow before class. Nothing too serious.
I'd just like to go over a few things from my lecture on symbolism.

Whoa...

I stared at the note for a moment.

Does this guy know something about what's been happening?

"Nah..."

"It's just a coincidence."

At least that's what I told myself.

The truth was...

I was kind of honored he'd even noticed me.

"Sure, Professor."

"I'll stop by."

I headed upstairs to my room, anxious to dive into the journal.

Never realizing...

I would never see that room the same way again.

Chapter Three

Scene 3 — Who is JW?

Knock... knock...

I tapped lightly on the professor's door.

"Come in, come in... good to see you again. Want something to drink? Coffee? A Coke?"
The professor welcomed me in.

"No, I'm good. Thanks. You wanted to see me about something?"

I really didn't want to spend any more time here than I had to. With everything that had happened lately, I was anxious to meet up with John and continue our hunt for MEVAKESH.

"Well, have a seat. This won't take long."

I settled into one of the leather visitor chairs, feeling the coolness of the worn leather beneath my hands.

"Well," he began, "I wanted to talk about the other day in class, when you blurted something out. I think the phrase was 'Got it!'... right?"

"It kind of threw the class session for a loop, and... well... I didn't want you to think I was coming down on your enthusiasm for my lecture."

He grinned as he spoke, and that immediately put me at ease.

Still...

There was something behind those eyes that made me think there was more going on here than what we were talking about.

As he continued discussing symbols and their importance, my attention drifted around the office.

The walls held the usual collection of framed degrees, certificates, and little knickknacks from his travels, I guessed. There were photographs everywhere, mostly black and white, faded with age.

Then something in the corner caught my eye.

A prayer shawl.

I'd seen one before in a textbook on ancient cultures.

What caught my attention wasn't the cloth itself...

It was one of the letters stitched into the border.

I recognized it.

It was white—faded now—with blue trim.

The same colors were adopted by the modern nation of Israel after returning to the land in 1948.

Kind of historic, I thought.

But what was he doing with it?

Didn't matter, I guess.

People collect all kinds of things.

"...so you see, Mr. Garofalo," he continued, bringing my attention back to the conversation, "I really appreciate your enthusiasm and your interest in my class."

"I'm hoping we can meet for coffee sometime and talk a little more about it... if that's all right with you." There it was again.

I met his eyes.

It was almost as though he was trying to tell me something...

Without actually saying it.

Normally, I hated things like that.

It always felt manipulative.

This was different.

Reserved.

Almost as if he were saying, It's a get to... not a have to.

"Yeah... sure."

"Anything if it helps my grade." I grinned.

"Then it's a date!" he replied with surprising enthusiasm.

We both stood and awkwardly shook hands.

That was weird.

As I bent down to pick up my backpack, I noticed the nameplate on his desk for the very first time.

Dr. Jonah Whaller

Odd name for someone from around here, I figured.

Probably an out-of-towner.

"Hey, bro... wait up!"

It was John jogging down the hallway to catch me before my next class.

"So?"

"Learn anything new?"

"Nah."

"Didn't get much of a chance to look things over carefully."

"But..."

"I did find the author's initials on the last page of the journal." John looked at me expectantly.

"Well?"

"JW."

I said it almost absentmindedly.

Neither of us realized...

We'd already met him.