

January 2006

There are moments in life that become an apex for all that was and for all that is to come. Sometimes it's in the midst of a crisis, sometimes it's in the middle of an ordinary day, and sometimes it happens spontaneously in a circle of friends. But whenever it happens, the trajectory is launched and life can never be the same.

For the women gathered at the house of Molly Grinlough on a January night in 2006, none of them knew that their lives were about to change. They were *just* meeting once again in their five year old book club. The Magnificent Mams were *just* an innocuous group of closet romance readers who had branched out. Exploring the genres of historical fiction, Oprah's book list, the New York Times best sellers and now the Mam's choice, they were *just* doing what they did best, sitting around the fire in Molly's living room, snacking on M & Ms and discussing the book of the month, which *just* happened to be *In Search of Paul* by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed. None of them knew at that time, that a similar search would soon become their own. None of them knew that the revelation to come would transform their individual lives. None of them knew then that their moments were about to arrive.

Religion professor at Mainline College in Riverland, Ohio, Katharine Long, the responsible party for the Mam's choice of the month, had just finished explaining the arc of the book. The Mams were still reeling from her explanation of how the Biblical man, Paul, early missionary of Christianity stood in opposition to the Roman Empire. They were still trying to grasp the concept that Jesus then and maybe Jesus now would stand opposed to Empire of any kind when Jane started to talk about the cover of the book.

“Who is the half a woman on the cover? Who is she? Why have I never heard about the lady before? Who in the hell is Thecla?” She asked and then demanded. “Look at her.” She held her book up and pointed to the left side of the cover.

The Mams stopped and looked. There, in the shadows of a sixth century cave painting, was a woman, barely visible to the left of the illuminated figure of Paul.

“Damn it. Why is the woman in the shadows? I'm tired of this shit.” Jane complained and then threw her hands up in the air and leaned back in her chair, waiting for the Mams to explain.

“Did you read the book?” Sallie Quisenberry, the merry, chubby kindergarten teacher of the group, pushed her glasses back on her nose and started to laugh. “Jane Masters, do you realize that you just admitted that you didn't do your homework?”

Sallie continued in her reprimanding voice: “That was the whole point. She is only half there, and in the shadows, as a challenge to let her take her rightful place, where undoubtedly she shared the limelight with the Apostle Paul in the early church. Did you look at the real picture of Thecla in the book? Even my kids look at the pictures in the book.” Raising her finger and directing it squarely at Jane she announced, “I am going to have to call your parents.”

Katharine broke in then. “Now, don't be too hard on Jane, Sallie.” The college professor was used to students who didn't prepare for class and had years of experience of how to make the best of the situation. “There really are only about ten pages in the book that speak of Thecla.”

“I rest my case.” Sallie laughed again and placed her hands over her belly as she leaned back in her chair, planting a very smug smile on her lips.

Katharine continued, “The real story of Thecla is quite amazing. It is recorded in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.”

“What is that? I've never heard of it. That isn't in my Bible!” Priscilla, the devout born-again evangelical group member questioned Katharine.

“Well, you know, there were quite a few ancient writings that didn't make it into the Bible. The church fathers were rather select in the books that made the cut. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* were not even discovered until quite recently. But now we know that the stories of Thecla were well known in the early Church, and even into the 6th century, 500 years later. These stories caused a cave painter to paint Paul and Thecla in this incredible depiction, showing them both as teachers.”

“And if you would read your book, I mean if you would look at the pictures in the preface... You would see that Thecla was defaced. Someone poked out her eyes and dug out her hand. So that picture on the front, is actually a restoration, bringing her back with a question.” Sallie now sternly looked at Jane. “That was what the whole book was about. The church hasn't understood Paul at all. If we can let Thecla into the light, we might understand the truth about the early church and the Roman Empire.”

“Now children,” Katharine interjected. “Let's not fight. But, I can tell you did your homework, Sallie. That is the thesis of the book, and Thecla is the symbol of how we must rethink the message of St. Paul then and now.”

Jane reached into her bag and pulled out two bottles of Funky Llama wine. “And to that, I propose a toast! To Thecla! To women everywhere! To life!”

Sallie began shaking her head. “You didn't read the book, so you brought along some wine and now you want to cover up your lack of preparation by staging a party?”

Molly jumped up. “Works for me. I'll get the glasses and the corkscrew.”

Katharine laughed. “I should have known better than trying to get you to read a theological book. What was I thinking?”

“I liked the book, Katharine.” Abigail pulled out a her legal pad and held it up for Katharine to see. “This book made a lot of things more clear to me. I didn't realize how the Roman Emperors deified themselves. I never knew the language for Jesus was actually borrowed from the Emperors.

This is very good. Crossan and Reed are doing cutting edge stuff. My husband would have loved this book.” Abigail's smile turned into a frown as she looked down and remembered her husband who had died the year before.

“I liked it, too, Katharine.” Sallie agreed. “This is great stuff. The Peace Church people would just eat this up. We've been trying to get you Lutherans to agree for years that Jesus is a pacifist. This proves it.” Sallie, a card-carrying member of the Church of Brethren, had been taught pacifism in preschool and she still loved any thing that supported that focus

Molly re-entered the room and started passing out glasses.

“No thank you. You know I don't drink.” Priscilla gestured Molly on to the other Mams who quite happily took glasses.

Jane popped open the first bottle and held it out. “Cabernet Sauvignon, anyone? Red wine is good for your health, you know.”

An hour later, the Mams were quite relaxed. The wine bottles were empty. Words about Paul the the Roman Empire had been bantered about, and Katharine had dutifully continued to enlighten the less theologically inclined about the meaning of the book.

“If you read Thecla's story,” she had told them, “I think you will be amazed. She defied death three times. She was a young woman determined to be a disciple of Paul, but she was engaged. Her husband to be and her mother ordered her to be burned at the stake for running after Paul. The rain came and put the fire out. In another town, an official who wanted to marry her ordered her thrown to the lions because she refused his offer. The young Thecla was determined to become a Christian instead. A third time she was thrown to the lions, and that time the lions defended her. The story goes that she lived out her days in a cave and was never married.”

“I brought copies of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* for you. I thought you might be interested.” Katharine said as she began to pass them out.

Jane drained her last glass, plopped it down on the coaster and announced, “Ladies, I think we've got to go find her.”

“Find Who?” Sallie asked.

“Thecla, of course.” She firmly flattened her lips and focused on Sallie with a look of disbelief. “Where have you been?” Without giving Sallie a chance to respond, she told them all, “Ladies, we've got to go dig her up.”

Late that night, after tossing and turning for three hours, Katharine Long climbed out of bed, leaving her husband soundly snoring in their king-sized bed. She knew it was a crazy idea, but it stuck with her like the roll of fat camping out in her midsection since menopause. Downstairs, she signed in to her email account and began to compose a letter to her college roommate, Ursula.

Ursula Goodtree dusted the snow off her feet as she clicked open the door to her new Camry. *Why am I in Michigan? Why am I here for another winter?* She questioned herself and then answered. *I know why I'm here. Where else would I go? And here I come for another exciting day with Generation Y and the frickin' male egos in the department.*

An Associate Professor of Archeology, Ursula had watched her career grow and then stagnate in the throes of the Michigan public university system. She knew it was no one's fault but her own. She could blame it on the male dominated profession, the lack of opportunity, the grind of the daily teaching process, but in the end, she was the one that wasn't going any where because she had forgotten how to dream.

The snowflakes twirled around her. At another time of her life, she might have enjoyed the

beauty of this winter day. But now the flying ice bits only signaled three months of barren weather ahead, and a reminder to pick up her Prozac prescription on the way home from work.

Why do I feel like a robot with frozen parts? What is my problem?

If you were a fly on the wall, when Ursula drove onto campus this day, you would never guess what was going on inside her head. The custodian who greeted her at the door to her department building, though, could tell you about her beauty. Her black hair radiated out in curls framing a fashionable floppy hat of mink. Wool flaps covered her ears, and a ribbon pulled them together against her rounded chin. Her sable brown wool coat reached down to high heeled black leather boots. At 48, Ursula's olive complexion, long slender body, beautiful face and dancing eyes still turned many heads.

The leather furniture in her tidy office, formed a cozy circle looking out onto the snow covered campus. Warm reds, oranges and yellows created a place of quiet beauty and welcome. The place where Ursula hung her hat at the University of Michigan was a place of distinction she had achieved by years of hard work.

Ursula flipped on her computer to print out her lecture outline for the day and opened her email. She knew time was short, but it was impossible to sit down at the computer without checking. So much junk mail these days and faculty messages to sort through. Scanning the new emails her eyes focused on a bold entry from Katharine Long. Without thinking or looking at the clock, she opened the mail and began to read.

“Dear Ursula,

Greetings from your old buddy in Ohio. It has been too long, girlfriend. We have got to plan a weekend trip sometime this Spring. But, in the meantime, I have a very strange idea. I can't sleep. Ah, menopause!

I think I told you that I've been in a book club for several years. Tonight, we discussed In

Search of Paul by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed. *Our group was focused on cave paintings found in the Cave of St. Paul on the side of BülBül Dag in Ephesus by an Austrian archaeologist in 1906. Are you familiar with the picture of Thecla and Paul, side by side?*

Our group had the idea that they wanted to go search for Thecla. I know it's a long shot, but even to plan some further excavations in that cave? There are six of us ready to go. You're our ticket to Turkey. What do you think?

Am I just some crazy menopausal woman who can't sleep or is this a great idea?

Love, Katharine.

For many months, Ursula's fall sabbatical had been looming like a phantom on the horizon. Never before had she faced a quarter off with dread. Her shrink kept bringing it up every week, Katharine's issue. It was a symbol of the state of her life. She was only 48, but she felt like an Eskimo ready to wander off to die. Her enthusiasm had burned out somewhere along the path of 25 years of college teaching and archaeological digs.

Suddenly, Ursula's issue poked its head front and center and she laughed. *A cave dig in Ephesus to find Thecla with a group of Katharine's crazy romance readers?* It had been a long time since Ursula was so amused.

A few minutes later, Ursula was headed for class with a smile on her face and a new spring in her step. *Yes, Katharine, you are crazy. But just maybe...*

Her shrink was amazed when she presented her plans for a fall dig. "It's perfect, Meredith. Don't you agree, it's exactly what I need? The Turkish government has given me a green light and assigned one of their archaeologists to the project.. Tourism is big business there these days, you know. They have poured millions into excavating the tier houses in Ephesus and have plans to restore them

eventually.”

“You go, girl,” Meredith instructed and cut the session short. “Make an appointment for next month to give me an update.”

PREPARATION

And so it came about that the Magnificent Mams under the leadership of archaeologist Ursula Goodtree prepared for the Archaeological Expedition in Search of Thecla. For each of them, there were issues. Underneath the surface of their orderly lives, they struggled for many things. Things real and things imagined. Things beyond this world and things they could not even conjure up into their thoughts. They were looking for enthusiasm, hope, peace, spiritual clarity, purpose, and love. They were a group of women, like most people everywhere; plodding along on the path, but wishing for a mountain top.

KATHARINE

May 2006

The aroma of curry and fresh bread flooded out of the small restaurant when Katharine and her husband John entered the Taj Mahal for a late dinner. This strip mall eatery was their favorite place in town. Mr. Singh, the owner, beamed to see his friends and extended his arm to show them the way to a booth in the corner. A single candle burned brightly by the shining plates and silverware waiting for someone to feast. “We'll have the buffet,” John told Mr. Singh, “and hot tea.”

“Help yourself, then,” Mr. Singh replied. “So good to see you again.” He shook hands with John and smiled at Katharine with a quick bow of the head.

Katharine and John placed their jackets on the chairs and then walked up to the long buffet. “I’m hungry!” Katharine announced. John began heaping the curries on his plate, chicken, lamb, and a generous helping of rice, topping off his plate with several large pieces of pan, some Raita and salad. Katharine was slower, and filled her plate with a spinach/cheese dish, pan, Raita and some of the lentil soup.

Back at the table, Katharine brushed her light brown hair out of her eyes and smiled across to John. She admired John's white hair, and appreciated his handsome face that had been a constant in her life since college days. Standing 5 foot 11, she found it almost impossible to find a tall partner, but John had fit the bill at 6 foot 2 and they had enjoyed a solid relationship for 35 years. “I love you, John.” Katharine said.

“What do you want now?” John laughed. “I can hear it coming. You want a new car?”

“No, I just wanted to tell you I love you, that's all.” Katharine blushed, and realized that John really thought she was out to get something.

“I love you, too, dear. How was your day?”

“Oh, my. Do you really want to hear? Every time I think things can't get any worse with my college students, something else happens. Today, I collected their term papers. Out of twenty, only ten turned them in. Five had excuses, the other five didn't realize the papers were due today. I've read two of the papers so far. One was excellent, the other? Pieces of Internet websites and the only reference sited was Wikipedia. It keeps getting worse, John. I don't know what to do.”

“Sounds like you need a vacation. How about a trip to Hawaii? My company is sending me there for a week at the end of the month. Could you take a week off and join me?”

“Oh, I don't think so. That will be right at the end of the semester. I can't leave then. Could

you wait and go in the summer?”

“No, it's for a conference. Oh well, maybe another time.”

“John, do you remember that debate a few months ago on the Book of Revelation at Word of God College?”

“Do I remember? You were spectacular. You knocked the boots off the Word of God professor.”

“I'm not sure everyone would agree with you. Even some of my own students thought I was wrong. There was an editorial in the student newspaper today about the end times with an indirect reference to me. But the thing that is really bothering me is that I keep getting emails from a man named Moses Sun. He seems to have a copy of the text of my remarks and each day he sends a paragraph with corrections, arguing with my point of view. The worst thing though, is at the end of each email he says, 'You must stop preaching false teachings, or else.' “

Katharine shuffled papers in her purse and pulled out the last two emails from Sun and handed them to John. Picking up her spoon, she enjoyed the lentil soup, soothing her throat and calming her from within. “What should I do?” She breathed out a sigh of relief, now she had finally shared her problem with John. He'd know what to do.

John glanced through the emails and his eyes lingered on the threat at the bottom. “I think you need to report this to the Provost and Campus Security to begin. I'd like a private investigator to check up on this man. If the college won't pay for it, I will.”

“I don't want to make a big deal about it.” Katharine responded.

“Let me handle it, then. I'll have an investigator on it tomorrow. It's not something to play with Katharine, there are some crazy people out there.” John stood and announced, “I'm going back for seconds.”

Katharine tried to finish the food on her plate. No seconds for her tonight. Her stomach was

full, and she didn't feel like eating as she worried more about the Sun emails.

When John returned she decided to change the subject. “Did I tell you that Ursula got the grant to dig that cave in Ephesus? She says there is enough money to take our book club along! The Archaeological Expedition in Search of Thecla will be the last two weeks of September. The beginning of my sabbatical!”

“Can I come?” John asked

“Well, this is really a woman thing, I'll have to check. Maybe you could come over and meet me after the dig and we could do some traveling. Could we go back to Italy and have a second honeymoon?”

“Whew, you really are a romantic tonight, Kath. First you tell me you love me, and now you want to drink wine with me in Italy. What's going on?”

“Life is short, John. I want to enjoy each day fully with you.”

“Let's finish this conversation at home. Are you ready to go, dear?” John picked up Katharine's coat with a flourish and a smile played on his lips. “Yes, hold that thought, Kathy.”

Sallie

August 30, 2006

Sallie laughed into the phone. Her friend's daughter, Suzie, explaining the antics of her firstborn son on the other end of the line had kept a solid stream of laughter going for over a half hour.

“When are you going to come visit Auntie Q?” Suzie laughed.

“The question is when are you going to come visit me, dear. You know I'm getting older! I'm 66. I'm retired. Can you find a little respect for your wise auntie?. You have to honor your elders and visit them. I'm not a young whippersnapper any more.”

Suzie sighed into the phone. “But it's impossible for me to get off work these days. You don't have to work any more!”

Sallie laughed, “You think just because I'm retired I have nothing to do! You have no idea how much work it is to be retired! At church, all of the sudden they think I can hold up the world because I don't have my day job any more. And I have just begun cleaning up my house from 35 years of neglect. Do you have any idea how many books I have waiting to be read in my book room? No, dear, I am not your image of a pool lizard, I do need to learn how to relax. Oops, I promised the pastor I'd meet him at the nursing home at 10 to do rounds. Gotta go. Guess who is now the queen of the caring ministry for Bethel Brethren Church? I'll talk with you real soon, and you look at your calendar and see when you can come visit me.”

“You can come and sit by my pool. I'll teach you how to be a pool lizard.” Suzie quipped.

“OK, You've convinced me. I'll put you on the schedule, as soon as I get home from Turkey! Did I tell you about my trip? Oops, I really need to go, I'll call you later. Love you, Suzie!”

Sallie placed the phone back in its stand and stood eying the messes on the living room floor. Last night, a surge of energy caused her to dump several boxes of old school materials out for sorting. But soon her enthusiasm waned. She watched “House” and headed off to bed. Now looking at the mess, she could only imagine stuffing it back into the boxes and returning it to the mess room in the basement.

The calendar hung above the kitchen table by the phone. August was almost gone. Sallie sat down and sighed. Now that retirement had arrived, why did she feel like a deflating balloon? Pulled and pushed by others and from deep within, she could almost watch her busy self frantically running from here to there and doing, doing, doing. To what end? She had finally arrived at that cherished time called retirement. She felt empty. Picking up the keys, she headed out to the garage to meet the pastor.

Two weeks left to pack for Turkey, she thought. Now that was something to be excited about. An archaeological expedition! How remarkable that Ursula would take an old lady like me along. Well, she's never seen me, so she doesn't know that I am the last person in the world that an archaeologist would want to dig a cave. But perhaps I can come in handy in other ways, she smiled. For as long as Sallie could remember, she had brought laughter and tears running down the faces of her friends.

Sallie Quisenbery, a robust little lady, had devoted her life to young children, teaching second graders, first graders and then graduating to kindergarten for the last 10 years. Raised on a dairy farm in southern Ohio, she had settled only a few miles from the farm in Cherish City where she landed a teaching job, after finishing stints in Brethren Voluntary Service on the East Coast. Her crowning achievement was a masters degree that she earned with much midnight oil over five years in her early 50's when she lost her mother, had a hysterectomy and could never get her classroom or her house completely organized.

Sallie mentally checked off her to do list in her mind. She was more than ready for an adventure. Perhaps it will fill this emptiness I feel growing inside me, she thought. The garage door opened, and she was off to meet the pastor.

EMILY

September 5, 2006

“You are going where?” Josh yelled into the phone. Emily cringed as she held the phone away from her ear and he continued to rave. “We didn't get married this summer because you had to start graduate school in the fall. Now you are going to Turkey?”

“I... Um... Josh. You don't understand. This was a once in a life time opportunity. Gran

wasn't up to the trip and offered it to me.” Emily whispered into the phone. *How could she explain it to Josh when it barely made sense to herself. All she knew was that it was her destiny to go on this trip. The trip called to her like....*

“Emily, the engagement is off. I don't think you have any intention of marrying me. I've had it.”

The phone clicked in Emily's ear and she sat holding the phone in disbelief. “Josh? Josh? Are you there?”

When she made these plans a few weeks earlier, she knew Josh would never understand. Fear had held the truth inside until there was no time left. Joshua would understand. He had to. He had no choice. For the last seven years they had been planning their life together.

Emily Jean Turner placed the phone back on its stand and stared out the window. The green leaves of summer were beginning to turn. Yellows and reds were starting to fill the landscape of her parent's Indiana farm. Autumn was coming. A time of change.

The changes from college to graduate school were going too quickly for Em. The trip was a perfect parentheses to give her some time to settle down and prepare for her new life in the religion department of the University of Chicago. And Josh? He was convinced her studies would drive a further wedge between them and at times he was sure it would lead her on a path straight to hell. Josh was such a man of God, but sometimes he refused to use his head to think through what he believed. Emily refused to abandon her mind in her service to Jesus.

Yet she believed in their love with a passion and couldn't believe their theological differences could really drive them apart. Her father had predicted she may be wrong. With a deep sigh, she dialed Josh's number again and listened to it ring into the growing space of loneliness within her heart.

JANE

September 15, 2006

Jane flipped open her cell phone and pushed a few buttons. "Charlie, Jane here. I just want to check with you one more time about those stocks before I leave the country. Please call me." Looking at her watch she calculated the time she needed to make it to the gym, read the Wall Street Journal and check with the Republican party headquarters on how the polls were leaning this week.

Carefully folded on the bed in the guest room were the clothes she was planning to pack. Along side her casual wear, she had placed her steel toed boots, hard hat and construction jumpsuit. It had been a long time since Jane Masters had stepped into those. Long after her blue collar days post high school, she had always kept them ready to go out on site on the construction projects she managed as the owner of a building company. But now it had been 20 years since she sold that company for several million dollars. She was surprised to find the clothes exactly as she had left them in the attic closet.

One more thing to pack, she went down to search for her spelunking tools in the basement. During her midlife crisis 15 years ago she had joined a Caving Club. With her millions tucked carefully away into income producing stocks, she was free to play. After exploring the caves in Ohio and the Midwest, she had spent a year traveling the United States and then the world. A cave-in stopped her cold in Alaska, and she hadn't been caving since. For the good of the Mam's she was ready to try again. Thecla was worth the effort.

Now, Jane checked the dream journal she kept by her bed. Her Jungian analyst was going to have a field day with last night's nightmare. The images in the dream continued to haunt her. Beyond description, yet she tried. When she woke up she had written, "Like 9-11 emergencies happening in every city at the same time. Like all the bridges in America collapsing. Like the stock market dropping 5,000 points in one day. There I was, standing in the ruins of the United States of America

and all of the sudden, Julius Caesar strolled by and said, 'You, too, Brutus?'"

It was that condemnation from inside that haunted her the most. *Whom had she betrayed and what did that have to do with anything?* Her lover, Jess, told her to hang it up and let it go. Didn't she know that all menopausal women had fantastic dreams?

The Roman Empire. What could that possibly have to do with the 21st century in America? Perhaps caving in Ephesus was the answer, digging into the first century of a fantastic empire. Perhaps, that was the key.

Jane's thoughts continued to spin. *This archaeological expedition must be my craziest trip, since I tried to climb Mt. Everest on my 50th birthday. That hadn't worked out so well, with a broken leg and some bruised ribs, I was happy to get off there with my life intact.*

But the Mam's called, and how could I be left behind? No siree, I'll go with this crazy group of women to the end of the earth looking for Thecla. And if there is any evidence of her in that little cave, I will find it. Fighting off lions, saved from being burned at the stake by a rain storm, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul who never made it into the Bible, but was a well-known figure in the early church? Now here is a story waiting to be told. Look out church fathers, the Magnificent Mam's are on the way.

MOLLY

September 15, 2006

Molly dusted the table in Mark's room. Looking past the swimming trophies on the bookshelf, she stopped to look into the bright eyes of her youngest son, smiling with the family at high school graduation. Her eyes jumped to his crew cut photo from basic training. Only two months ago, she thought, and now -- Iraq. Scrubbing the table, she thought if she could get his room clean enough,

maybe Mark would be okay, too. In the shining finish she noticed her down-turned lips. What will it take, she wondered. A prayer? A change in Washington? A different life?

An empty nest and a son off to war. She had imagined grief, but not terror when all the children were gone. When Mark's college plans evaporated before her eyes, the last thing she expected from her Quaker-raised son was enlisting in the army. Now a recurrent body bag dream haunted her nights and days.

“It will be good for me, Mom. I'm not ready to go to college. I need an adventure. I want to serve my country.” She remembered Mark's words as if it was yesterday. The pain that lodged in her chest that day still pulsed now as she turned to close the door and start packing for the trip.

Turkey. Next door to Iraq. A crazy, almost unbelievable journey about to unfold for Molly and her book club. Her husband kept questioning her safety and almost refused to let her go. Molly thought if Mark could be in Iraq, then why couldn't she be next door in Turkey? More than anything she wanted to hold him in her arms again. Just a little closer, seemed like one thing she could do.

She looked in the mirror and tried to straighten her graying hair. Her belly was protruding from her jeans, rather dumpy looking she thought. “Ah, menopause. The havoc you visit on women's bodies. What was it that book said once? 'The human body knows very well how to die.' Now the days of her youth had slipped away, she stood at the brink of change, not sure she liked what she saw in the mirror or through the windows into her present life. She picked a suitcase from the closet and left Mark's room behind to pack.

PRISCILLA

September 15, 2007

Priscilla opened her Bible to the Book of Revelation, Chapter 1. “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by

sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.” Reading aloud, she reviewed the words again.

Of all the books in the Bible, Priscilla felt most acquainted with Revelation. Through Bible Studies at the Living Life Center, from television evangelists and through her own meticulous reading of John Hagee's books, Left Behind, and Hal Lindsey, she knew the Book of Revelation. Yes, the time is near, she agreed. It won't be long now.

Priscilla bowed her head and began to pray. “God, help me wake up the Christians living in the United States today so that they might know you and accept you as their personal Savior before you come back to torment those who don't choose you. Lead me, guide me, show me the way. Lord Jesus, come.”

The doorbell rang, and Priscilla wondered who could be visiting so early. In the kitchen the timer went off, so she ran in to take the cinnamon rolls out of the oven, before answering the door. Peeping through the hole, she saw a familiar corduroy jacket. Moses, again?

Opening the door, she exclaimed. “Moses! What is it? You're up awfully early!”

“Can I come in?” The little man stood only five foot five, but still towered over Priscilla by two inches. His dark eyes were sparkling this morning and he held a DVD of the Left Behind series under his jacket. His curly black hair framed his face and the rimless glasses rested on his pointed nose. Priscilla thought he was cute for a 55 year old. “What is that I smell?” he asked.

The cinnamon rolls were filling the house with the aroma that was one of the reasons Priscilla cooked them in the first place. “How about, I give you this for one of those?” Moses handed the DVD to Priscilla and pointed to the kitchen with a question mark on his face.

“Oh, OK. It's a deal. Come on in.” Priscilla took the DVD. “Thank you, Moses. That was

kind of you to bring this gift. I've been to see these in the theater, but I'd really like to watch them again. This is such an exciting time to live, don't you think?"

"The End Times? Yes! Exciting, scary, harrowing. It's like, 'Hold on, baby, we're on the roller coaster now!' "

"You'll have to come over to my house and see my collection of End Times materials some time. Ever since The Late Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsey, I've been reading everything I can get my hands on. And that, Priscilla, is exactly why I came to visit you."

"Last night you were telling me that you're going on a cruise on the Book of Revelation and then to Ephesus. I was wondering if I could come along. I mean, do you know if there are any vacancies on the boat? Would it bother you if I came along for the ride?"

Priscilla took a bite of the cinnamon roll and then looked at Sun's curly hair. Hmmm. Was he getting serious already? He already knew she didn't want any funny stuff. Experience had taught her to draw the line quickly as to what she would and would not do on a date, or before marriage. She was tired of dating men who tried to get her into bed on the first date.

"Moses, I told you my standards, and any way it's out of the question. This is a book club trip. No men allowed."

"Tell me more!" Moses quipped.

"This is an educational tour. We're learn about the countries as we travel. There will be a historian on board who will be teaching about the Roman Empire and Katharine McCobb will be lecturing about the Seven Cities of Revelation, Patmos and interpretations of Revelation. She teaches at Mainline College in Riverland and is quite knowledgeable. I don't agree with her, but she knows a lot. It's okay to hear different perspectives at times."

"McCobb, you say? False teaching, my dear. False teaching. I attended a debate she had with George Faith from Word of God College a few months ago. She is completely misled on the Book of

Revelation.”

“Now Moses, Katharine is my friend.” Priscilla licked the sticky cinnamon butter off her fingers and enjoyed the smell of the hazelnut coffee brewing on the counter. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Priscilla sat a cup of coffee in front of Moses, and motioned to the sugar and cream. Heading back to get herself a cup, she felt a chill. She shivered, took a sip of the coffee, black. Beginning to warm again, she returned to the table. Moses was shifting in the chair and all of the sudden Priscilla felt uneasy. Finally, she had met a perfect gentleman, a man of faith with whom she could see eye-to-eye, maybe she was afraid to really have a serious relationship. She shrugged off the uneasiness as she sat down.

“I’ll take good notes and pictures. I’ll tell you all about it when I return. Okay?”

“Okay.” Moses took a sip of his creamy coffee. “We’ll talk more about this later.”

Priscilla felt the chill again, pulled on her sweater off the chair and downed her cup of coffee. What was it that she didn’t trust about this man? Maybe getting away would help her sort it all out.

URSULA

September 16, 2007

Ursula dropped her briefcase on a chair in her office and hurried over to the desk. She had completed the prep work last night, but hoped for more response. The Archaeological Society of Professionals shared information quickly. In the past month, recommendations from Australia, Austria and Israel helped her craft a plan of action for the dig. Manuals on archaeological cave exploration provided the basic information, but suggestions from experienced spelunkers helped refine her course.

Scanning recent emails, Ursula’s eyes stopped on an unexpected name. She looked away from the computer, gazing out her window as memories carried her back. Joe? Her heart still held the joy

from that summer in Israel, thirty years ago. Joe studied Hebrew, while she completed an on site practicum required for her doctorate. They met on a kibbutz tour, climbed the Mount of Olives together and shared a picnic lunch in the Garden of Gethsemane. For the next two months, they had lived and breathed together. In the fall, Joe had returned to the University of Southern California, and she to the University of Chicago. The romance flourished through emails and phone calls for several months, until Joe called one night to tell her he had met his soul mate.

Another season of grief, she remembered. Now the leaves were twirling outside her window, as they fell to the earth. She looked across the grass littered with the yellow, red and brown leaves tossed about in the winds of autumn and then turned back to the computer to read the note from Joe.

“Dear Ursula. My wife died last night after a three year battle with lung cancer. My grief consumes me, like a black whirlpool pulling me under, drowning my hope and energy. Pray for me. Love, Joe.”

Without thinking, she typed the first thoughts off her heart, “Joe -- So very, very sorry to hear of your loss. I will pray for you. I'm preparing for a dig in Turkey, leaving tomorrow. Let's meet when I return. Loving you always, Ursula.”

Ursula poked the send button and then looked down to see it was gone. She quickly opened her sent mail file to read again what she had wrote. “Did I really write, 'loving you always'” she wondered. There it was, sitting simply on her screen. Thirty years later, her heart had not skipped a beat. “Oh my God, Joe. I will have to start praying again.”

August 31, 2007

Molly felt the wheels touch the pavement and sent a silent prayer of thanks to God for a safe trip. “One down, two to go she thought.” She knew that airplanes were very safe, but that didn't

always ease her fear of flying. She looked over to her seat mate and knocked her on the arm. “Wake up, Amelia! We're in Chicago.”

Amelia jumped at Molly's touch. “Already? I just went to sleep!”

“Actually you've been snoring for an hour.” Molly reported

“I have not! I do not snore!” Amelia protested.

“Yes you do,” Emily chirped in from across the aisle. “My mother told me that they always made you sleep in your own tent on the Colorado trips.”

“Shhh!” Amelia held her forefinger to her lips. “Don't tell the family secrets!”

The flight attendant's voice broke into the cabin, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Chicago. The temperature is 60 degrees and weather report promises sunny weather. Enjoy your visit. For those continuing on to other points, a flight adviser will greet you in the concourse to direct you to your next gate. Please remain seated until the plane has come to a complete stop. Thank you for choosing to fly with us today, and we'll hope to see you again soon.

Katherine flipped open her cell phone and pushed Ursula's number. “We're here, Ursula!”
Where are you?”

“My cab is about 5 minutes out. I'll meet you at the gate.”

“It will be great to see you again! This is exciting, and I don't get excited about much these days. See you soon!” Katherine tucked her cell phone into her purse and the folks in the front cabin began stepping off the plane.

Jane pulled Molly aside as soon as they got off the plane. “Why do Emily and Priscilla have men with them? I thought this was a woman's event. Who told them they could bring their boyfriends?”

Molly shrugged and raised her hands up in the air. “Who is in charge? We should have talked about it. We didn't. I think we'll have to grin and bear it.”

The Magnificent Mam's had a tacit agreement that there would be no men involved in their club from day one. Occasionally, they would let one of the spouses prepare a meal, and there had been some holiday parties when men were allowed, but the general rule of thumb had been women only.

“They know they aren't going on the dig,” Molly added. “And if we have meetings, we can keep them out.”

“I certainly hope so!” Jane laughed. Just as they began walking toward the next gate she bumped shoulders with a tall handsome man in khaki's and a blue button down shirt and tie.

Always the flirt, Jane quipped. “Well, excuse you, Mr. Politician. Who do you think you are bumping into me that way?”

“I'm always distracted when I see beautiful women. I'm sorry, you took my breath away and I forgot to watch where I was going.”

Jane looked into his deep brown eyes and noticed he looked like a man who had just been elected. “A little happy with yourself there, aren't you?”

“So happy I've finally met you! I noticed you on the flight, but had no idea I'd actually get to talk with you. Dan Parks is my name.” He extended his hand to Jane, who returned a firm shake and laughed.

“Men!... Never case to amaze me. That was very smooth, Mr. Parks.”

“Could I borrow that Wall Street Journal when you're done with it? I haven't checked my stocks yet today.”

“Well, sure. As a matter of fact, you can have it.” Jane handed the newspaper to him as Molly caught her eye.

Molly whispered to her, “What are you doing talking to a MAN? Didn't you know this was a women only tour?”

Jane laughed. “Got me. Okay, I'll be good from here on out.”

But Mr. Parks had other ideas. “Jane, we seem to be walking in the same direction. Where are you headed next?”

“Amsterdam, then Venice. What about you?”

“What a coincidence. Don't tell me you're going on the Revelation Cruise?”

“Oh, this is a little scary. I think I better stick with my friends here, but maybe I'll see you around.” Jane started to run to catch up with Molly and Priscilla.

“Wait, Jane. No need to be afraid.” Mr. Parks opened his jacket and held out his I.D. Jane read Homeland Security engraved under Officer Daniel Parks on the gold badge.

“No fear, OK. I'll see you around.” Jane continued to run and was soon ten feet ahead of Parks with the Mams.

Molly grabbed Jane's arm. “Now, behave. No more picking up strange men in the airport. He could be a terrorist!”

“No actually, he works for Homeland Security!”

“Oh my God, our country has really gone crazy. Homeland Security?”

“Now Molly, you know they have done a great job protecting us the last few years. When's the last time the terrorists have toppled a big building? Six years ago and counting

“OK. No more political chatter. Do you have the hats and shirts for the MAM ceremony? We thought we could crown Ursula at the gate.”

Jane patted her carry on luggage. “It's all right here.”

Molly retreated into her own thoughts while she tried to keep up with Jane's long strides. Ever since George W. had been elected seven years ago, it seemed to her that the country was going to hell in a hand basket. Jane, she knew, had a completely different perspective. Whether you look down with a portfolio of stocks tucked under your arm or you look up from the bottom, shuffling credit cards to put food on the table, the United States of America appears like two different realities. The problem

Molly had was that she could never get Jane to understand. In fact, it had injured their friendship several years ago, and now Molly had learned to keep her mouth shut, but that didn't keep her mind from racing.

From every angle she could find it seemed to her that the grand ole U.S. of A. was heading for destruction. The American family has fallen apart, one third of new housing starts for prisons, hundreds of thousands of jobs have left for cheaper labor markets in other countries and the mistaken war in Iraq is threatening to topple the U.S. Government and economy, with unbridled spending, cultivating many more terrorists and taking Mark away. What did it mean to attack a country to impose democracy? Why did Mark go to help?

While Jane's stock portfolio had done very well in the past year under George W., Molly couldn't shake the persistent feeling that a crash was on the horizon. From her view in a small city government, she saw fewer jobs, fewer resources, persons living on the edge, an underclass of people growing, children who were difficult to educate, people damaged by drugs and alcohol, mental illness and the foreclosure problem that just wouldn't go away.. Long ago she had shifted her deferred retirement account into a flat percentage. She couldn't trust the stock market. It had cost her, but eventually she knew the fall was coming.

There's an elephant in the house! But try to talk about it? "Pessimist!" They label you. "Is your glass half empty or half full?" someone would ask. The failing American democracy run by millionaires who are more interested in getting elected and catering to special interests than looking after the future of the country? What could she do about any of it?

"Molly! Where are you?" Jane yelled into her ear. "You look like you just lost your best friend."

"Oh. I'm sorry. You don't want to know my thoughts. How far is to the gate? Do you think we'll have time for the ceremony?"

“By my calculations we should be there in 3 minutes and it's 45 minutes until takeoff. It will be close, but I think we can do it. Get your paperwork out, and we'll be ready to go.”

Ursula jumped out of the cab and paid the fare and a handsome tip. In return the cab driver carried her bags all the way inside. “Thank you, Charlie,” she smiled. “I hope to do business with you again soon.”

“Much obliged, Mam.” Charlie saluted and his heart skipped a beat as he took one last look at his favorite customer. They didn't make many beautiful women like her, he thought. Tall, graceful, beautiful curly black hair and those brown eyes. A man could spend a life time enjoying those, but not him. He was headed back to his usual boring, obnoxious business men. “Bon voyage! Come back soon!” he yelled and ran back to the cab where a police man was parked ready to give him a ticket. The police man waved him on.

Ursula breezed through at the first class turnstile and ran to the gate where the Mam's were circled up waiting.

“Katharine!” She embraced her old roommate and tears streamed down her face. “It has been too long! You don't look a day over..... 50?” She laughed, the Mam's joined in.

“So, these are the Magnificent Mam's? I've heard so much about you!”

“Yes, Mam. We are, Mam. Yes, we are magnificent Mams. And...” Jane sputtered her silly words as the group burst into laughter.

“You have arrived just in time for your induction ceremony before we trans the Atlantic. Circle up, now, ladies.” Molly distributed a piece of paper to each of the Mams. In the center of the huddle she placed a square yellow cloth, and then a bowl, and then reaching into her bag, she pulled out a large package of M & M's, tore off a corner and poured them into the bowl.”

The loudspeaker interrupted, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we will now begin preboarding for Flight

1923 to Amsterdam. Persons with special needs and families with young children please advance to the gate.”

“Now, let us read in Unison our welcome to Ursula.”

“We the Magnificent Mam's do hereby bequeath upon Ursula Goodtree, the title of Honorary Magnificent Mam, in recognition for her amazing achievement of obtaining a grant to make the Archaeological Expedition in Search of Thecla, and we do also bequeath upon her the highest award possible. We do hereby dub you, Super Mam.”

Molly unrolled out a red cape with Super Mam blazing in Yellow Letters on the back, dancing it at her side, as if ready to take on the bulls of Pamplona. The Mam's laughed, and then she placed the cape around Ursula's shoulders and fastened the velcro at her neck. :Now, Ursula, it's time for your part.”

Those waiting to board the flight were beginning to form a larger circle around the Mams. Ursula looked at Katharine with a question in her eye. “You didn't tell me about this!”

“What is life without a few surprises?” Amelia winked. “The fun has just begun.”

Ursula laughed and began to read her lines, “I, Ursula Goodtree, do solemnly pledge to loyally serve the Mam's. I will lead their archaeological expedition to the best of my ability. I will eat M & M's I will laugh at the Mam 's jokes. I will not take myself too seriously. I will share my opinions freely and respect those of the other Mam's. As God is my helper, I hereby accept the title of Magnificent Mam for the duration of this expedition.”

“You may now partake of the elements,” Molly instructed. She reached down into the bowl and grabbed a handful of M & Ms, handing one to each of the women. They ate the morsel, and then Molly nodded to Priscila standing beside her, and she did likewise.

“You didn't know what you were in for, did you?” Priscilla said as she handed several M & Ms to Ursula.

“No, Katharine didn't tell me about all of this!”

“And now it's your turn, Emily.” Molly pulled out another sheet and began to read. “On this auspicious occasion we do hereby solemnly and most reverently admit to our numbers the favorite granddaughter of our esteemed member, Abigail Wesley. Emily Jean Turner, repeat after me.”

“I, Emily Jean Turner, do solemnly swear.”

Emily laughed and looked nervously about the large crowd gathered.

“Hold you hand up, dear. Like a girl scout taking an oath?” Amelia demonstrated and let out a large guffaw.

Emily held up her hand and began, “I, Emily Turner, do solemnly swear.”

The loudspeaker interrupted the Mams. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now ready to begin general boarding for Flight 1923 to Amsterdam. Rows number 30-40 may now board.”

“Let's hurry,” Molly continued. “To faithfully serve the Magnificent Mams and to do my best to uncover the truth about Thecla.”

“To faithfully serve the Magnificent Mams and to do my best to uncover the truth about Thecla.” Emily giggled.

“This is a very serious ceremony,” Jane stated. “You can't laugh yet. Wait two minutes.”

The loudspeaker interrupted the Mams again. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now ready to begin final boarding for Flight 1923 to Amsterdam.”

Moses Sun came up and tugged Priscilla's sleeve. “That's us! You need to come now!”

“Wait a minute, we're not finished. Or you go ahead, I'll be there soon.” Priscilla shrugged him off as Moses' face expressed frustration, almost anger, as he walked away toward the gate.

“Do you know him?” Katharine asked in dismay. Her head turned toward the small man walking away, and then back at Priscilla with a question. “He's going with you on the trip?”

Priscilla looked at Katherine's face and her stomach turned over. “He's a nice man, really.”

Molly interrupted. “Ladies, there will be time for discourse later.”

“Hey, who put you in control?” Mrs. Q put her hands on her hips and mocked Molly. “There will be time for discourse later.” The Mam's all began laughing.

Molly interrupted again, “It's almost time to go. Now that the chocolate communion is over, we will close with blessings. I will begin, and we will proceed counterclockwise. “God bless our expedition.”

“God bless your little hearts,” Amelia quipped in a southern drawl. The Mam's began giggling.

“Blessings on our pilots across the Atlantic!” Katherine prayed.

“God bless us and keep us and lift his countenance upon us,” Priscilla added.

“May God be with us as we bravely go where no archaeological expedition has ever gone before, and may God bless us with rich findings.” Ursula prayed and then flung her cape out behind.

“Super Mams, here we come!”

“She's good!” Amelia laughed and looked at Katherine. “Where did you pick her up?”

“May God bless each of us in our journey of discovery,” Emily said seriously. Amelia looked at Molly with a slight turn of her head, and then nodded in appreciation for Emily's thought.

“Out of the mouth of babes!” Amelia quipped.

“God bless us everyone!” Jane announced and then from her bag she pulled a bundle of red hats. The floppy straw hats had embroidering across the front with the Mam's names, and on the back, there was a picture of Thecla from the cave painting.... and then the title, “The Mam's Archaeological Expedition in Search of Thecla. She placed them on the Mam's heads one by one, and said, “God Bless You, and You, and You, and You, and You, and You! And Me!”

“Why is Emily's hat shocking pink, instead of red? I want pink, too!” Amelia asked.

“You ungrateful twit,” Jane retorted. “You receive a beautiful gift and the first thing out of your mouth is a complaint? I think you taught kindergarten too long! Don't you know that women

under 50 are to wear pink hats, and only the wise women 50 and over are eligible for the Red Hat Society, And dear, I just signed us all up.”

“Thank you, Jane! These hats are wonderful.” Molly said. “Is there time for a picture?”

“Ladies and Gentleman, we will now completing final boarding for Flight 1923 for Amsterdam. All passengers should proceed to the gate.”

Dan Parks stepped up and tapped Jane on the shoulder. “Could I do the honors? Does someone have a camera?”

Molly had already pulled her camera out of her bag. “Here it is!”

The Mam's gathered together. Ursula, Katherine and Jane took the back row, towering over most of the others by a head. In the front were the shorter ones, Emily, Molly, Amelia and Priscilla.

“I'll take it on three!” Parks yelled.

The Mams smiled, tilting their heads together, their arms on each other's shoulders.

“One – Two – Three!” Parks snapped the picture. “One more time. One – Two Three!”

The Mams posed, the crowd cheered. The flight attendant said, “Please board!”

And they were off, grabbing their carry on luggages the Mam's made their way to the gate and the Archaeological Expedition in Search of Thecla was on its way.

Scene Three... Headed for Amsterdam. Crowning Ursula a Magnificent Mam... Bathroom stop; art museum... waiting for Venice plane. Officer Parks lurking in the distance. Jane attracted to them and strikes up a conversation at a bar.

Scene Four – boarding in Venice. Bombing in Iraq. Sun puts the move on Priscilla. Josh and Emily take a gondola ride. Ursula begins to dream about Joe. Jane and Parks take in a stroll and some Italian wine. Molly is frantically calling home about her son. Katherine prepares her lectures, retires early. Toasting the Mam's on deck. Jane has T-shirts made for the expedition. Ursula is excited, she and Katherine stay up late reminiscing.

Scene Five – Patmos

Scene Six -- Athens

Scene Seven – Turkey and the Seven Churches

Scene Eight – Cruise ends, dig begins

Scene 9, 10, 11 --- Digging and discovery

Scene 12 -- Translation, Mam's party... Joe is the main translator.

Scene 13 -- Press Conference. Moses fires...

Scene 14 --- Emily gets words to the Mams, who secretly join her on Patmos, while Parks, Josh and Sun continue to look for her.

Scene 15 --- Enlightenment on Patmos

Scene 16 --- Final press conference.

Scene 17 --- Josh and Emily reunite,

Out to eat with her husband at an Indian restaurant, complaining about the students being dogmatic, not serious scholars, etc... Anti other religions Calling me not a Christian... Meeting with the Bishop to discuss Biblical interpretation. Sanctioned... in a denomination school. May need to leave the teaching field.... or go to the Graduate level where scholarship is appreciated.

