

The Apostle series part 1

GOSPEL TRUTH

1

Thessaloniki

The Boeing 757 descended from its cruising altitude of 36,000 feet, passing through a veil of thin clouds, making its approach over the bay of Thessaloniki. As the plane aligned itself for landing, the passengers didn't initially see the devastation of the city. An earthquake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale had struck northern Greece and destroyed whole neighbourhoods the previous month. The onboard computer was guiding the aircraft down while the first officer announced their arrival in five minutes.

'Conditions are good with a light breeze and a pleasant ground temperature of twenty-three degrees Celsius. I'm pleased to confirm there have been no after-shocks for the past two weeks. We'd like to thank you for flying with British Airways and we wish everyone an enjoyable stay or a safe onward journey.'

Georges Deschamps leaned back against the headrest and looked down at the sea. Ripples covered its dark blue surface, and he made out the shape of fishing boats riding the waves. In his hand he held a print-out of e-mail messages, an exchange two days earlier with his friend, Jean-Yves Baudouin.

Georges

Where are you? Can you come to Thessaloniki at once? It's urgent.

Jean-Yves

J-Y

I'm in London at a seminar. We finish tomorrow. What's up?

G

Can't explain. Come as soon as you can. Tell no one.

J-Y

E-mails from Jean-Yves were always succinct, but he'd never received anything so cryptic before. They'd known each other for years, first as students at home in Belgium, latterly for a time as colleagues on the faculty of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. It was by chance that they had both found themselves teaching in the same institution. Their friendship had begun when they represented Belgium at Under-21 basketball and it blossomed in their newly-adopted country.

Now in their mid-thirties they had chosen different paths. Jean-Yves had married a Greek girl and become fluent in the language. He intended to spend his entire career in Greece, happy to remain a lecturer enjoying the pleasures of the Aegean lifestyle with wife and daughter. Georges had had no such emotional ties and had returned to the Brueghel University in Brussels two years before when promotion to a senior post had beckoned.

Georges considered Jean-Yves one of the most intelligent people he had ever known. He was capable of grasping the essentials of a problem and analysing its core issues at lightning speed. More than that, he was able to communicate his subjects in a way that made them appealing to his students who held him in the highest regard.

What could possibly lead Jean-Yves Baudouin to urge Georges to come at once to Thessaloniki? Why could he just not explain the reason in an e-mail? And why that mysterious ending – *tell no one*?

The aircraft banked and steadied itself. Georges lifted his gaze towards the mountains west of the flightpath. He briefly glimpsed the distinctive shape of Mount Olympus some fifty or so miles away, shimmering in afternoon sun. He was vaguely aware of an announcement reminding passengers to keep their seatbelts fastened until the plane came to a complete halt. Smoking was not permitted in the airport except in designated areas. The voice was competing with the rushing of the

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engines, their tone rising and falling as their speed self-adjusted in preparation for landing.

At the moment the attendant's voice fell silent, the plane shuddered, rocked by sudden turbulence. Wisps of cloud flashed by the window, and the city suddenly appeared below the wings while the aircraft positioned itself for touchdown. As the engine note died back, Georges saw the grassy outfield of the airport's perimeter before the start of the runway. The plane jolted and swayed. He was thinking that he had known smoother landings when the engines roared, the seat kicked him in the back like a sports car under acceleration and they gathered speed, racing above the runway, soaring steeply into the sky.

Inside the cabin all conversation stopped, followed by an outbreak of subdued chatter. A chime sounded, and the first officer's voice came over the loudspeakers, his tone cheerful and unruffled.

'Well, ladies and gentlemen, that was a surprise. You may have noticed that didn't go quite as planned.' He paused. If this was to allow time for laughter, he was disappointed. 'Nothing to worry about. We were caught by a gusting tailwind just as we were about to touch the tarmac. This took us above permitted landing speed, and the computer cut in accordingly, a standard safety procedure.'

Georges noticed that he was gripping the armrest tightly and his pulse was racing. Relaxing his hold, he realised that both palms were sweating. He began breathing in deeply and steadily. The first officer spoke again as the plane banked and climbed to clear the mountainous hinterland. It swung round in a wide arc, and peaks appeared below them, closer than Georges would have wished.

'Ladies and gentlemen, Air Traffic Control has given us another approach. This time we'll be landing into the wind, so there'll be no risk of a repeat of what happened at the last attempt. The mountains will be behind us, and we'll be coming in towards the sea.'

This information was received in silence.

Although the aircraft descended smoothly, Georges could sense the anxiety in the cabin. As the city came into view the plane lurched again, and a woman cried out in alarm somewhere further back. He tried to take his mind off all immediate concerns and focus instead on the view. It offered distraction but little comfort. The extent of the earthquake damage came as a shock. Whole districts had crumbled to ruins, and a deep scar ran diagonally through the centre of the conurbation as if the city had been slashed with a sabre.

They had descended to a level where individual buildings could be clearly identified. Georges had worked at the university for four years and knew the city well. He tried to pick out familiar landmarks, blocks of flats where friends lived, streets with cafés that he frequented, the museum, the hotels along the promenade. He was relieved to see the medieval White Tower still standing undamaged on the seafront. Screwing his eyes, he tried to pick out the university complex and the ancient church, the Rotunda, further inland, but the aircraft bucked once again, buffeted by the capricious wind.

Now the ground was rushing up at a rate that Georges thought much faster than usual. He imagined the pilots or their computer locked in a desperate battle with the elements to bring the plane safely to earth. Then they were speeding over the outfield. The runway was frighteningly close, and the wheels met the surface with a thump. No sooner had they straightened out than the engines roared again.

From the rear of the cabin a voice rang out. '*Freno!*'

Whoever had called out *brake!* had his wish granted. The reverse thrust of the engines pushed everyone forward, hard up against their seatbelts. Gradually the great machine lost momentum, came to the end of the runway and turned to follow the pathway to its stand.

Spontaneous applause and cheering broke out, mainly from those sections of the interior where Greek passengers were seated. Most of the others were British, and they strove to appear calm and detached. Georges did his best to emulate them, though he had to wipe his face surreptitiously with a paper tissue.

The chime sounded again, this time followed by a different male voice. 'Ladies and gentleman, this is the captain speaking. It's my pleasure to welcome you to Thessaloniki. Sorry for the bumpy ride ... all part of the service.'

The rest of the message was drowned out by laughter and applause.

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The handlers did their work efficiently, and there were no delays in baggage reclaim, nor in passport control. Little more than twenty minutes after landing, Georges wheeled his suitcase through to the arrivals hall where a crowd of people of all ages, shapes and sizes waited to greet friends, colleagues and loved-ones. Several were holding up printed signs bearing names, some in Roman letters, others in Greek. Close to the front of the barrier, Georges saw Jean-Yves.

The two Belgians embraced each other. As they drew apart, Georges sensed a tension in his friend's manner. Still holding him by the arms, he looked into his face.

'What is it, Jean-Yves? What on earth is bothering you?'

Jean-Yves turned away. 'Let's get out of here.' He took his friend by the elbow and began striding towards the exit. 'The car's this way.'

Georges hurried to keep up, manoeuvring the suitcase with difficulty through the crowded forecourt. 'Why all this mystery, Jean-Yves? Speak to me.'

But Jean-Yves remained silent until the suitcase was stowed in the boot and they were sitting in the car. He was reaching forward to turn the key and start the engine when Georges grabbed his forearm.

‘Not yet. I want some kind of answer. I’ve changed my travel plans and flown here from London at a minute’s notice. Now I need to know why.’

Jean-Yves turned to face him. ‘It’s about Vassilis.’

‘Vassilis Grigorios?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about him? What’s the old devil been up to now? Nothing would surprise me.’

‘The old devil,’ said Jean-Yves, ‘... is dead.’