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SOJOURNER

A novel by

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PROLOGUE

Although it wasn't safe to travel solo, Jeff Dashe came the last two hundred miles alone, walking silently on a seemingly endless trek. He continued day after day, but not because the military ordered it. His search for Ana drove him ever southward into the hilly terrain of eastern Oklahoma.

Standing on the floor of a brown, stone canyon, he pressed dry, shredded lips together and stared at the first proof of other human life he'd encountered in days. Someone had painted words in olive green paint directly on the face of a large boulder which rested on the right side of the canyon's mouth.

SOJOURNER'S ROCK

May all who pass here remember
they are but sojourners on this earth.

1 Peter 1:16-21

April 29

Beside the words, a huge green hand print, missing the top part of the middle finger, loomed on the surface of the rock. Next to this message, a wooden sign had been staked into the ground. It read:

ALL PERSONS MUST PASS THROUGH
QUARANTINE
BEFORE PROCEEDING SOUTH
VIOLATORS WILL BE IMPRISONED
Follow signs to quarantine →

Jeff pulled his lower lip into his mouth and tried to resist biting off the dried hunks of skin as he considered the signs. His gaze then swept out over hundreds of inscriptions scrawled on the lower portion of the canyon walls, mostly in green paint—some of them ten feet or more off the ground where people had climbed to make their statements. He looked at one nearby.

Gabby and Brenda Stevenson of Lincoln, Nebraska.

May 1. Headed for San Angelo.

Beside the words were two hand prints— a bigger and a smaller one. Next to this message, another with small, neat lettering said:

Hal, Barbara, Tom, and Kim Lethgart of Topeka.

Passed here in April. Lost baby Kelly to a fever.

Going to Tyler, TX.

Underneath the words were four hand prints ranging in size from large to small.

Jeff stepped further into the canyon and realized all these messages had been painted by people wanting to leave a record of their passage south, hoping separated loved ones would see they still lived, and know where to look for them. Some messages were memorials to those who had died. Others, within the space of a few words, communicated volumes of grief, uncertainty, and longing. One said,

Carly Wilson, 15 years old. May 11th

Bobby: Mom and Dad are dead.

I'm going to try to make it to El Paso

and see if I can find Aunt Dot.

Please come when you can.

Perhaps, Jeff thought, Ana passed by this place. Would she have left any sort of message?

The disasters had come. No matter how much better it got from this time on, the losses from these catastrophes had affected every person living and would be remembered as long as history continued to be recorded. No one would have to ask, “What disasters?”

This story begins a year and a half before Jeff Dashe stood at Sojourner’s Rock.

Chapter 1

PHILADELPHIA - January 5th

Heather Poole parked her late-model burgundy Buick outside the Attlebury Geriatric Clinic of Philadelphia. She kept the heater on while she made a last-minute addition to her list, hoping no one would accost her for leaving the motor running.

Not wanting to know lurid details about medical procedures, Heather had a tendency to avoid asking questions when she had the chance. This time, however, Heather had a carefully-prepared list of questions and planned to methodically go over each one during her consultation with the doctor.

Today would be her first opportunity to see her father since he'd entered the three-story, brown brick clinic to participate in the experiment. She'd been leery about her father being used as a guinea pig, but after viewing the glowing "docu-mercials" on Regeneration Therapy, Heather, too, held the hope her father could have his vitality restored.

Would he have changed yet? Would he be changed at all? What if he was in the group getting the placebo treatments? *Oh, I hope not. His heart is so set on being one of the pioneers of Regeneration.*

She took comfort in the fact that, even if her father *wasn't* receiving the actual therapy now, his participation in the clinical trials had secured the promise of the real deal when the government approved Regeneration Therapy.

A picture of her mother in a total-care nursing facility came to mind and she frowned. *Who knows? Maybe, if this works, they could try it on mom.*

No more stalling. She shut off the engine and got out of her car. Walking to the door of the clinic, Heather told herself not to get her hopes too high. It was probably too soon to tell. She slowed her pace, giving the electric door time to respond to her presence.

Once inside, Heather stepped into the lobby and toward the desk at the far end. Questions from her list so preoccupied her, she didn't notice the man walking in her direction.

"Heather," he called to her. "I'm right here."

Her eyes focused on the man. "Dad!" she exclaimed, and hurried to close the remaining distance between them.

They briefly embraced before he led her through a set of french doors into a lovely glass-enclosed courtyard. When they were seated in the dappled shade of indoor trees, she spoke again.

"You look great! How do you feel?"

He laughed. "I feel *wonderful*."

She'd been warned: Even those taking the placebo might feel better for a while, simply because they *wanted* to feel better. It would probably take a few months to ascertain whether or not any real gains had been made, but she wanted to remain positive.

"Well, whatever you're doing, it's sure put a sparkle in your eye."

He leaned close to her. "More than that, Heather," he said, putting his hands on his chest, "It's putting *life* inside me."

"You think you're getting . . . it?" she whispered.

He closed his eyes and inhaled. "I'm sure of it. I can't tell you how good it feels to not be so . . . old." When he looked at her again, she could see his eyes were moist.

Her own eyes began to well up and she squeezed his hand. "Keep going, Dad. Keep getting better and better."

After their little meeting in the courtyard, Heather left her dad for a few minutes to meet with Dr. Mehndolson in his office. As soon as she felt she had the doctor's attention, she got the list out of her purse.

"Are you monitoring my father's other medications? If he improves, how would you know to reduce or stop it?"

Mehndolson wanted to sound professional, but caring. “We track every single patient every day. We run samples every five days. You needn’t worry about that.”

She forgot her list for a moment. Although it might be premature, she couldn’t help asking, “Just how far can this therapy go? Will his hair revert back to brown? Will he lose his wrinkles or will he just *feel* a lot younger?”

Mehndolson removed his reading glasses and looked at her. *Why are most people so driven by wishful thinking?* he wondered. *Why can’t they wait for facts and then make intelligent decisions?* He cleared his throat. “You must have seen the ads put out by Global-kem and Roller Genetic Labs. The truth is, Ms. Poole, those were advertisements, not documented cases. We don’t know ‘how far’ the therapy will go. That’s why we’re doing these experiments.”

“But weren’t tests done over in Europe and Japan?”

“Europe and China,” he corrected.

“Whatever. The point is, the experiments were done. Why is it we have to re-do what’s already been done? If that stupid President Cole hadn’t created this delay, the whole thing would have been over and done with a couple of years ago. Regeneration would have been approved and all these people would be young again.”

Thousands of elderly “baby boomers” in the US— who fought aging tooth and nail— had seen ads regarding Regeneration Therapy and inundated doctors with requests for it. While a few scientists said the testing in other countries hadn’t met scientific criteria, others accused the US government of being overcautious in restricting the use of a treatment already “proven” elsewhere. Siding with those who wanted more testing, President Cole made quite an issue of the attempt to put approval of the treatment on a “fast track.” Regeneration proponents insisted Cole and other politicians were acting as pawns of certain pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries, who made billions from an aging populace. Where was the truth in the midst of all this?

“I’m not a politician,” Dr. Mehndolson said, “*or* a man with a product to sell. I’m a scientist. I don’t base my work on the fears or the claims of others. I deal in hard facts. If Regeneration Therapy works, these tests will prove it. If it doesn’t, we’ll have protected people from a scam.”

Heather shifted around in her chair, then looked at her list again. “If my father needs new or different medications, how will we know this?”

Dr. Mehdolson wagged his finger at her in a slightly scolding manner. “Both the literature and the viewing disk we gave you cover all this. We will see he gets the best of care.”

“I just want to be sure.”

The doctor smiled. “I understand. But remember, it’s in *everybody’s* best interest for us to watch our patients very carefully and document every aspect of their care. The eyes of the world will be upon us, and we want to be without reproach.”