

LOVE CASTS OUT

FEAR

**A JIHAD SURVIVOR'S JOURNEY
FROM REVENGE TO REDEMPTION**

BROTHER NATHAN

WITH DAVID CULROSS



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Brother Nathan with David Culross, *Love Casts Out Fear*
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I would like to dedicate this book to my family. As you read my story, you will understand why.

To my father: in six short years Baba taught me how to live, then he taught me how to die. “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

To my mother: for more than eighty years Mama has shown us how to trust God . . . for everything. “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

To my wife, Susan: for the past twenty-five years we have walked hand in hand along the path where God has led us. “A wife of noble character . . . is worth far more than rubies. . . . She speaks with wisdom, and . . . her husband . . . praises her (Prov. 31:10, 26, 28).

To my three children, Maggie, Martin, and Michael: you have filled our home with joy and laughter while modeling the love of Jesus. “Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the LORD” (Ps. 128:3–4).

To my brothers and sisters: there is Magdy, who started the ministry . . . and then Onsey, who never knew his Baba . . . and finally Hoda, Phoebe, and Sawsan. From Asyut to Karya Maghola to Cairo, we made the journey together. “Brothers [and sisters] are born for a time of adversity” (Prov. 17:17).

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth
out fear.

1 John 4:18 KJV

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INTRODUCTION

I first met Brother Nathan in the mid-1990s, then heard him speak at a conference in Jerusalem. He was one of several Christian leaders from around the world who were involved in reaching their own people with the message of Jesus Christ.

One evening we were taken by bus from our hotel to another site, then secluded in a room with absolute security. For the next hour we listened as Nathan described the horrific events that had changed his life forever. As we prepared to leave that evening, we were urged not to share his story publicly, for fear of compromising his safety.

Now Nathan believes it is time for you to hear that story. It is typical of what is happening every day to believers all across the Middle East. I have disguised some names and

other distinguishing elements to protect Nathan and other Christians in this part of the world, but the actual scenes are portrayed in authentic, true-to-life detail.

Recently I traveled to many of the places where these events took place. Along the way I discovered that, in spite of Christianity's first-century arrival in Egypt, Islam has been that country's dominant religion for centuries. Today over eighty million Muslims comprise nearly 95 percent of the population, and since 1980 Islam has been the official national religion. The number of Christians from all denominations is less than three million, but this still represents the largest Christian community in any Middle Eastern or North African country. The majority of the country's evangelical believers are found in southern Egypt, where Nathan once lived.

Now I invite you to travel with me to a tiny village in Upper Egypt called Karya Maghola (Kar-EE-ah Mah-GO-lah). You will not find it on a map, but it is still there. The name we have given this town is adapted from an Arabic word that means "any place" or "unknown place." That's because it is just like countless other villages scattered all across this ancient part of the world, where the people and the culture have hardly changed for centuries.

As we become unseen guests walking its winding streets, my hope is that you will begin to see, through Nathan's eyes, how a loving God protects and provides for his children, even in the face of persecution. Then, through the living example of this twenty-first-century disciple, I hope you will catch a

Introduction

glimpse of how our mighty God can do extraordinary things through the lives of ordinary people who fully surrender to his will. Ordinary people like you and like me. Ordinary people just like Brother Nathan.

David Culross

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story you are about to read chronicles the life of a small boy who became a man in a place that is much in the news these days: the country of Egypt. It tells how one horrific event in his childhood filled him with hatred and a passion for revenge, and how God used that tragedy to teach him the true meaning of forgiveness. You may wonder: Did these things actually happen? Is this story really true? Let me assure you, everything you read here is true. How do I know? Because it is my story.

The chain of events that combine to tell my story began over fifty years ago. Most of the account is based on personal memories that continue to haunt me today. The rest is woven together from firsthand recollections from my mother and other family members and friends who have played a part

in this real-life drama. And my story is still being written in these same remote villages of Upper Egypt.

Throughout the book I have made every effort to portray these events exactly as they took place. My prayer is that, somewhere within these pages, God will challenge you to let him direct your path, just as he has directed mine.

Brother Nathan

1

BLACK FRIDAY

JUNE 1962

KARYA MAGHOLA

The distant crowing of a neighbor's rooster told me that a new day was dawning in the village of Karya Maghola. It was an ordinary little town, no different than countless others scattered across the arid Egyptian landscape. The dark gray of another morning slowly turned to purple, then brightened to orange as the sun pushed its way up from behind the distant mountains. Overhead, tiny black dots of scavenger vultures—often called Pharaoh's chickens—started tracing lazy circles in the sky as they surveyed the parched landscape for food. In many ways, they were much like the people below,

who were slowly waking up to another dry and dreary day in the place I once called home.

As daylight began to peek through the window, I rolled over on my sleeping mat and tried to go back to sleep. But it was no use. It was already getting hot in my room as the warm glow of sunrise continued to chase away the shadows from Dark Mountain. People in the village said Dark Mountain was evil, and when I asked why they said lots of bad people lived there. But on that morning its foreboding frown slowly faded as the sky turned blue and the blazing desert sun reached down to bake the dusty streets. It was *always* dusty in Karya Maghola.

Soon the rooster's strident cry was joined by other morning sounds. I heard the bleating voice of my goat calling out to be milked. Next door, Ibrahim was opening his tiny grocery shop, and I could hear the shuffle of sandaled feet as people scurried along the narrow, winding street. The chug-chug-chug of a dilapidated old bus signaled its daily trip to the distant city of Asyut. A smile spread across my face as I remembered it was my favorite day: Friday. *No school today!* I thought. *We will have children's church with Baba.* Fridays were *always* special in Karya Maghola.

My daydreams were abruptly interrupted by Baba's booming voice from the next room. "Time to get up, Nathan!" he called. I threw off my faded sheet, yawned, and stretched as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Then I rolled up my lumpy pallet and pulled on my faded *galabayya*, a traditional

robe-like garment worn in the Nile Valley region. In the next room Mama was fixing our Friday breakfast of bread, cheese, and goat's milk, a welcome change from the usual meal of beans. And best of all, our family always ate breakfast together on Fridays. But first there were chores for everyone, even a six-year-old boy. I had to visit the rooftop "patio" to care for my goat and gather eggs from the chicken pens. Maybe there would be one or two extras today, so Mama could bake us a special treat.

When the family finally gathered for breakfast, we began with a prayer by Baba. I loved to hear my father pray. It always seemed like God was Baba's very best friend, and he was sitting right there in the same room with us. We ate our simple meal together, all seated on the floor around a low wooden table. As I drank my mug of milk, I thought, *Someday I will be able to pray just like Baba*. After we finished eating, my older sisters helped Mama clear away the dishes. Now the fun could begin. It was time for children's church.

Baba was known in our village as Pastor Latif. Although he had grown up in a poor family, he had studied to be a school-teacher. It was not long, though, before Baba felt God calling him to leave the teaching profession to become a pastor. So he moved his young family from the tiny village of Shotb to the nearby city of Asyut, where he enrolled in Bible school. He completed his four-year program in only three years while also pastoring his first church, which was close to the school. When he graduated in May 1956, I was only six months old.

Over the next six years Baba ministered in three villages in that same Upper Egypt region. When he became pastor of the church in Karya Maghola, he also assumed the unofficial role of village leader. Because of this, he never needed to make an appointment to visit a family. He would simply knock on their door and they would invite him in. Soon I was tagging along on these visits as if I were my father's little shadow. I would simply say to Mama, "I have to go with Baba."

The life of a village pastor in Upper Egypt was not easy. Baba's salary was very modest, and often he was paid in more practical ways, such as with gifts of food, clothing, or other necessities. With no other staff to help him, Baba was truly the pastor of all the people, including the boys and girls. Our Friday children's service was one that he looked forward to each week. Ministering to boys and girls was almost like being back in the classroom.

Our family's house was built on three levels, which was somewhat different from other houses in the village. There was a rooftop level, with pens for our goat and a few chickens. It also had a simple wood-fired oven, where each Saturday Mama baked our bread. My whole family—two parents and six growing children—lived in four small rooms on the second floor. The furniture was quite basic: several chairs, a bed for my parents, a low table for meals, and a table and benches in the sitting room for anyone who came to visit. If there were overnight guests, the benches could be pushed together to form additional beds.

The ground floor of our house was entirely taken up by the village church. It contained one large room furnished with a small pulpit and a simple table from which Baba served the Lord's Supper. When Baba and I walked downstairs for children's church that Friday, he took along his sturdy, hand-carved walking staff. As was the custom in those days, most village men usually carried one wherever they went, whether they needed it or not.

The church was especially hot and muggy that day, and soon it was jammed with nearly one hundred energetic boys and girls. We spent the next two hours singing happy songs, reciting Bible verses, and learning lessons from God's Word. The morning session ended with all of us gathered around Baba for a Bible story. Then we went running outside for a free time of play. Two of our favorite games were hide-and-seek and racing to the date grove to gather seeds from fallen fruit. The one who captured the most pits was the winner.

When the midday heat became unbearable, we went back inside for a closing prayer. As the boys and girls were heading home, Ibrahim walked over from his shop next door, along with another neighbor named Youssef. Both men were elders in the church, and they needed to talk to Baba about some business matters. They retreated to the shade in front of the church building to escape the blistering rays of the sun. I was right beside my father, as usual.

Suddenly two men in long, dark *galabayyas* came charging down the street. They also wore checkered headdresses called

keffiyehs, and their faces were covered by scarves. Without uttering a word they pulled out big guns and began shooting at us. The explosive sounds of gunfire echoed through the streets and panic flooded me. I slapped one hand over my eyes and reached for Baba with the other, but all I could grab was his walking staff.

Then just as suddenly as it had started, it was over and everything was deathly quiet. For several seconds I couldn't move. Somehow the bullets had missed me. When I finally opened my eyes, I saw the terrorists in the distance, running toward Dark Mountain. Without looking, I reached again for Baba, but he wasn't there. I slowly turned and saw him huddled on the ground beside me. "Baba, Baba, what's wrong?!" I cried.

He groaned in pain as blood oozed from his side, turning the dusty street from brown to dark crimson. Youssef lay nearby in a lifeless heap. Ibrahim had escaped by diving through an open window into his shop.

Mama and my sisters rushed from the house to Baba's side as neighbors and friends came to help. Ibrahim ran to the town's only telephone and called for an ambulance. Karya Maghola was only a small village and the nearest hospital was in Asyut, so it would be two long hours before it could get to us. Time seemed to stand still, and I wanted to shout, *Why doesn't somebody do something?* But there was very little anyone could do but wait.

The minutes slowly ticked by and Baba remained remarkably calm. He tried to reassure Mama that he would be all

right. “I am okay, don’t be afraid. God will take care of you,” he said. Then he prayed, “Dear God, I place my wife and children into your hands.”

While all of this was happening, Mama knelt by his side, occasionally bathing his face with a wet towel. I watched from nearby, and I could tell things were bad. Once I heard Baba whisper to Mama, “If . . . if something should happen to me . . .” A cold shroud of fear began to wrap itself around me, and I thought, *What does he mean “if something should happen”? Nothing ever happens to Baba.*

When the ancient ambulance finally arrived, they gently lifted Baba onto its bed and put him inside. Mama squeezed in next to him and I tried to follow, but they wouldn’t let me. The door slammed shut, and as the ambulance wobbled its way back down the rutted street I began to sob, “No! No! I have to go with Baba!” Ibrahim gently took my hand and led my siblings and me to his house next door.

Friday night was filled with bad dreams and terrible memories. Images of Baba’s bleeding body were seared into my mind. Saturday passed in a fog. The heat and dust didn’t even bother me and I wanted nothing to eat. I kept asking about Baba, but no one would tell me anything. When the sun rose on Sunday, it was no better. There would be no worship service that day in Karya Maghola. How could we worship without our beloved pastor?

Early that evening Mama returned home, accompanied by a few close friends. Several neighbors saw her arrive, and

they came to meet her. When she walked upstairs to our rooms, there was no one there. “Where are my children?” she asked. One of her friends explained where we were, and she said, “Please bring them to me.”

When I heard Mama was home, I was so happy. *Now I will see Baba!* I thought. But when I ran into our house, he wasn’t there. As I frantically looked around the room, I saw many men’s faces, but not Baba’s. Everyone was crying, including Mama, and she was dressed in black from head to foot. I had never seen her like that before. I ran over to her, but when I looked into her eyes, it seemed she was in some faraway place. My mind was filled with so many questions that I thought it would explode. I still didn’t understand what had happened; no one had told me anything. Finally I couldn’t keep things inside any longer.

“Mama, Mama, where is Baba? I want to see him, is he all right?” Mama didn’t answer.

“You can’t see him now,” Baba’s friend Jakub replied. “He is not here.”

“I know he’s not here, but where is he? I want to see him!”

“He’s in heaven with Jesus, Nathan. But don’t worry, you will see him again someday.” Then he tried to hug me and calm my fears.

I roughly pushed him away. “I don’t want to see him *some-day*. I want to see him *now!*” Then I burst into tears, whirled, and ran from the house.

When a person dies in a village in Upper Egypt, they are

buried at once, usually in the town where they were born. So when Mama came home on Sunday, Baba's funeral service and burial had already taken place. No one had bothered to explain this to me. But that evening, I slowly began to understand what had happened on Friday. When the ambulance took Baba away, it was for forever. He was gone, and he would not be coming back. He wouldn't be there to pray for our Friday breakfast or to lead children's church. There would be no more walks with Baba through the streets of Karya Maghola. Never again would I see Baba here on earth, and I knew that never again would Friday be my favorite day.

Later that evening, I slipped back into our house and watched from the shadows as a steady stream of friends and neighbors came to comfort Mama. I had been in the homes of most of these people, but I had never seen them act this way before. It seemed like the dreary procession would never end. The black clothes, the sad faces, the tearful prayers . . . the longer it continued, the worse I felt. Mama tried to be kind to our friends, but how can you be kind when your heart has been ripped out?

Finally, I couldn't watch any longer. No one seemed to notice when I quietly retreated to my room. I stood at my window and watched the sun slowly slide below the horizon. As the sky faded from orange to purple and then to gray, evening shadows—like slithering snakes—began invading the empty streets of Karya Maghola. In the distance the devilish face of Dark Mountain mysteriously reappeared, and it seemed

to be laughing at me. Now I understood why people said it was evil. It was the place where the wicked gunmen lived.

Alone in my room, I tried to sort through the jumbled puzzle of the last three days. For a while my thoughts just seemed to get more confused. I slowly began to discover answers to one set of questions only to have others elbow their way to the front of my mind. *How could you let this happen, God?* I wondered. *Didn't Baba tell me you are a good God, and wasn't Baba serving you? It just isn't fair!*

These are questions that no six-year-old boy should be forced to ask, and as they swirled in my head, I felt something new bubble up in my heart. Everything that had been bottled up inside for three days overwhelmed me, and hot, angry tears burst from my eyes.

With vivid images of Baba's vicious killers still cycling through my memory, I clenched my fists, raised them over my head, and shook them toward Dark Mountain. Then as the dark curtain of a desert night slowly descended on Karya Maghola, I breathed a passionate warning to the two terrorists—bitter words that should never come from the lips of one so young.

"Someday," I whispered fiercely. "Someday I will have a gun. And when I do, I will *find* you, and I will *kill* you, because *you killed my Baba.*"