

Chapter 10

Eilat, Israel, October 1999

Sirens stirred Simon to consciousness. He lay curled on the ground, his stomach in agony. Doors slammed. Footsteps approached.

"Who is he?" Someone stood above him.

"I dunno. Vagrant, I suppose. Funny clothes." They were speaking Hebrew, with a strange accent. Hands patted him. "No ID, no passport, nothing."

"Stolen, most likely. Hurry with the drip, he's lost a lot of blood. Looks Russian to me, or European." The speaker raised his voice. "We have an R43. Code one. Five minutes."

A needle pierced Simon's arm. The world faded.

He awoke in fear. He couldn't breathe. He forced his eyes open. Shadows congealed into objects—lights, machines, and tubes.

A nurse held a clipboard. "Shalom." She smiled and adjusted the machines.

Behind her sat a woman in a light blue shirt. She wore a gun.

"Is he awake?"

"Yes, but it'll be several more hours."

Simon understood only some of their Hebrew. "Where am I?"

"Yoseftal Hospital, Eilat. It's a miracle you didn't die."

"What year is it?"

"It is the tenth of Sheshvan. The twentieth of October in the West."

"No, the year. Please tell me."

She frowned, concerned. "Have you lost your memory? It's 1999."

He was back in the present. Relief surged through him like liquid balm and he slept.

Next morning, Blue-shirt flashed her ID. "I am Corporal Ziva Marshak, Israeli police. We need to ask some questions. If you are well enough, I will call my superior."

Struggling with the accent, Simon nodded. An hour later she returned with an older policeman, whom she

introduced. "Inspector Uri Levanon." He wore two stars on his lapels.

Levanon switched on a recorder and spoke too fast for Simon to follow. He tried another language, then English. Simon closed his eyes and smiled. "Ah, so we communicate." Levanon's accent was thick, his voice gruff. "Who are you?"

"Simon David Archer." It was an effort to speak.

"Where do you live?"

"Cam. In England."

"Married?"

"Yes, to Katherine."

"How you came in the park?"

Images swam before him—sea and ships, Michael and the doctor, the jungle and the gold. King Solomon. How could he begin to explain? Invent a story? He was too tired, and these were Israeli police. He just wanted to get home. "I was in Malaysia on an expedition. Looking for plants." He paused, the effort huge.

"You were in the park. Why?"

Simon opened his eyes. "Ahumm stabbed me."

"Who is Ahumm?"

"A Phoenician captain . . . from Dor." Simon's energy had gone.

Levanon's eyes narrowed. He turned to Corporal Ziva and spoke in rapid Hebrew, gesturing with his head. Simon only caught snatches, "playing games" and "lying." Sleep overtook him once more.

Inspector Levanon returned the next morning. "Okay, let's try again. How did you arrive?" He was still gruff.

Simon's mind had cleared. If he went along with them, surely they'd let him go.

"I came by sea. I had an accident in Malaysia. I fell into a pool and nearly drowned. Some Israelites found me. They brought me here." Every word felt increasingly stupid. He couldn't tell the truth—and he daren't lie. Would he now be trapped in Israel instead?

"Who are these people? What are they doing?" Levanon's English was limited.

"Collecting gold. They lived in the time of King Solomon."

The inspector's glare bored into Simon's eyes. His gaze softened. "Were you hit in the head?"

"Yes. Their doctor treated me."

Levanon pierced Simon with another long stare. "And they bring you here?"

"Yes. With the gold."

The inspector pursed his lips and grunted. "And then they stab you and suddenly you are back in 1999." A statement, not a question. "We contact your wife. She comes this afternoon."

Again, relief flooded Simon. "Oh, that's wonderful."

The inspector turned to Corporal Ziva and spoke in Hebrew. This time Simon caught the gist. "He's either brain-damaged or crazy." He turned back to Simon, his voice sarcastic. "Until we check your story, we take precautions. You are under arrest for illegal entry to Israel. One staff remains here. If not, she handcuff you to the bed."

Simon's elation burst like a balloon. *This can't be happening.* All because of a nugget of gold in a Malaysian pool.

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Wide-eyed, Kathy shook her head. "Good God, it is you. And you've got a beard." She gave him a cursory peck on the cheek. "You were dead. Your colleague, whatever his name is, was beside himself. The authorities thought he'd killed you. He went back to Austria in a huff. You went swimming and disappeared. Underground current or something. That's what the guides said. Why on earth did you go swimming there?"

"Kathy, you don't know how good it is to see you."

She dropped her overnight bag on the floor. "I had to travel to Kuala Lumpur to get your stuff. The authorities were useless. You were missing, and that was that as far as they were concerned. I mean, you could have been murdered. Or eaten. Didn't you go up among the tribes?"

She pulled a mirror from her handbag and checked her face. "I'm a wreck. Is there any water? It's so hot here." She turned to him, lowering her voice. "What's going on, Simon? And what the hell are you doing in Israel? The police said you breached border security. What does that mean?"

"It means I'm under arrest." He nodded at Corporal Ziva.

"What?" Kathy noticed her for the first time. "That's ridiculous! You aren't a criminal. The upright Doctor Simon Archer under arrest? Pull the other one."

"I can see you're upset. I'm sorry, Kathy, this was so . . . unexpected."

"Upset? Too right I'm upset. You've no idea what I've been through. When you didn't come home, the police were suspicious as hell—think you're trafficking drugs or something. They took samples of your plants in the greenhouses. The questions they ask you wouldn't believe. Endless interviews and forms. Of course, they didn't tell us anything. You are missing, presumed dead, and without a body we couldn't even have a funeral. It's been the worst six months of my life." She sniffled and dug for a hanky.

Six months? Simon choked.

"How is Ruby?"

"Poor baby. She's taken it hard. 'When's Daddy coming back?' she kept asking. She cried for ages when she heard you were dead. She doesn't have many good

days now." Kathy blew her nose noisily and stood. "Anyway, I must go and find myself a hotel. I'll come back in the morning, but I've no idea what we're going to do." Her heels clicked on the polished hospital floor.

Simon felt hollow with guilt at what he'd done to his family. He'd gone to help Ruby and made her worse. Kathy seemed harder than ever. He had to make it up to them. That meant getting out of here. "When will you lock me up?" he asked Ziva.

"Shabbat begins in one hour. Then I have to go. I'm sorry. Your Hebrew is strange."

Simon's ear was beginning to tune to the modern idiom. "How long must I stay?"

She smiled at him. "I am not supposed to tell you, but they tested your blood, clothes, hair, everything. All clean. They think you are—" but she used words he didn't understand and clamped the handcuffs to his wrist.

By Sunday, Simon was able to get out of bed. Ziva led him to a private room where Kathy and Inspector Levanon were waiting.

A tall man in a leather jacket entered. He too wore

a gun.

"I am Ariel Bar-Lev, from Shabak, Israeli Security Agency." He smiled, shook Simon's hand firmly, and sat. "I am sorry to trouble you, but we need a few more answers, if you don't mind?" He had obviously spent some years in England. "Tell us exactly what happened after you arrived in Malaysia."

Lying was both pointless and dangerous. So Simon shared his story.

Levanon shook his head. "Mr. Archer, you have head injury. You talk nonsense."

"No, wait, it's interesting." Bar-Lev turned back to Simon. "How much gold did you say?"

Simon paused. He was becoming tired. "Over five hundred and fifty talents, they said, whatever—"

Bar-Lev nodded. "One ship sank, meaning you landed with, say, four hundred and twenty. Where did you enter Israel?"

Simon closed his eyes. "Ezion Geber."

"How old was Solomon?"

"I don't know. Maybe forty."

Bar-Lev hesitated for a moment. "How long did

King Solomon reign?"

Simon opened his eyes and shook his head. "I have no idea."

"You never studied our history?"

"No."

"Well, I have. What you are telling us is accurate. If you'd read Israeli history, you would know Solomon reigned forty years. My question was a trap." Bar-Lev flashed a cold smile. "You've obviously had a trance or dream. Nevertheless, you arrived in Israel without a passport or visa, and we treat such invasions seriously. You might be a spy, terrorist, drug dealer, even mafia." He stood. "You will remain under arrest until we've decided what to do with you."

Invasion? Simon wanted to vomit. Ziva led him, shaking, back to bed. *What are Israeli prisons like?*

The next day Bar-Lev sat beside his bed and smiled. "Good morning, Simon. You look much better today. Okay, tell me, what really happened?"

Simon's heart quickened. "Sir, I told you everything. I promise I am not making it up." Now he wished he'd invented something—the truth was too

ridiculous.

Bar-Lev looked impatient. "If our border is insecure I have to find out."

"I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry."

The Shabak man stared. "Your case is most unusual, Simon. Your injuries match your story, but you cannot expect us to believe you." He tapped the arm of his chair. "I assume you were drugged and brought here by those intending evil. We will catch them. The mission went wrong, at least for you. It has affected your mind. Inspector Levanon will process your exit papers, and as soon as you are fit, you can fly home."

The liquid balm coursed through Simon's veins a second time. "Oh, thank you, sir."

"But don't expect a warm welcome if you are foolish enough to return to Israel." Bar-Lev stood and strode away.

That was fine. Simon had no intention of ever coming back.