

## Chapter 12

Simon puzzled over the array of Bible versions in the bookshop. Feeling awkward, he chose one at random and found several references for Solomon. With his heart quickening as he read. *"Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and lay with her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon."*

Here was Solomon in history, if the Bible was to be trusted. With some excitement he bore it home. *Bellamy on Botany* had impacted him thirty years earlier. Would this?

Beginning at the reference he'd found, Simon read through the story of David and Solomon, transfixed. He came to a passage about Ezion Geber and threw the Bible down. "That's it! That's exactly where I was."

"Look at this, Kathy." Simon said over breakfast. "It says, 'King Solomon also built ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath in Edom, on the shore of the Red Sea.' Elath must be Eilat. We sailed up the Red Sea." He stabbed the pages. "I was there, Kathy."

She stared out the window, her hands wrapped around her coffee. "When's your appointment with the psychiatrist?"

"Oh, tomorrow. Listen." Simon continued reading. "And Hiram sent his men—sailors who knew the sea—to serve in the fleet with Solomon's men. They sailed to Ophir and brought back four hundred and twenty talents of gold, which they delivered to Solomon.' That describes everything, Kathy. Men who knew the sea. That's Ahumm and the Phoenicians. They sailed to Ophir. Solomon spoke of it."

"Simon." She looked at him, putting down her coffee.

"And the gold. The clincher is the gold."

"Simon, please stop!" She slapped her hands onto the open Bible. Simon jumped. Kathy struggled to speak. "Now you're back, for the sake of Ruby, I'm willing to have another try. I'll leave Morrison." A sob choked her.

Simon's own tears erupted. "Oh, Kathy—"

"No, listen to me." She took several deep breaths. "I can't do this on my own. I need you to get rid of the greenhouses, and there can't be any more of this history nonsense. Give it up, Simon."

Simon gripped her hand. "Of course, darling, thank you."

The front door knocker banged.

Kathy stood to answer it, wiping her eyes. A chill draught invaded the passage.

"Oh, my goodness, it's a cold one today, Kathy." The visitor, an African in her twenties, shed a large coat to reveal a nurse's uniform.

"Simon," Kathy was still red-eyed. "This is Missie Reynolds, come to look after Ruby." She turned to the nurse. "Ruby's doing better this morning. I let her rest, but she'll need breakfast."

They climbed the stairs.

Missie's voice echoed into the kitchen. "You been cryin'?"

Simon sat with his emotions in turmoil. When Kathy came down, he whispered, "Kathy, what are you thinking of? How can we afford a private nurse?"

"Missie's been with us in Dursley. We've been together for months. Ruby loves her. Anyway, Morrison is paying her salary."

"What? Kathy, we need to discuss this."

"There's nothing to discuss. I talked it over with Morrie, and he's willing to continue paying her. He's

amazing, Simon. There aren't many MPs who would do that for their people."

"But I suppose they'd do it for their mistresses." The words came out before he could stop them.

Kathy looked at him coldly. "Missie stays, Simon. I said, I can't do this on my own."

That night in bed his wife turned from him, and he heard her sobbing—his marriage drifting away like a boat from its mooring.

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A few days before Christmas, the professor called him again. At the university, the last fallen leaves scattered the empty pavements like cornflakes. Like his marriage.

"Now, Simon, I've had the psychiatric report." Geering picked up a folder on his desk. "'The patient has characteristics of paranoid delusion psychosis. His cognitive impairment manifests in projecting the self through time and distance, referred to as mental time travel. If his symptoms are not the effect of a substance, for example, cannabis.'" The professor raised his eyebrows and peered at Simon over his glasses. "'The diagnosis of a brief psychotic episode is justified. This opens up the need for treatment using the appropriate

medication for psychosis coupled with psychotherapy targeting his beliefs.' He adds that you were resistant and confused. Please explain."

Simon shook his head, then stood and paced the room.

"Sir, forgive me. I have had as much as I can stand. I flew to Malaysia, with your blessing, but had an accident there. I had an experience where somehow I fell into history. I didn't ask for it. It just happened. It was a nightmare while it continued, and I thought it would never end. I wept with relief when it was over, but to be honest, coming back has been worse. My latest research confirms it was real, but no one believes me."

"Simon—"

He stared through the mullioned windows. A seagull skimmed past in the dead sky. Simon spun round.

"You sent me to a psychiatrist who asked a hundred pointless questions and thinks I invented the whole thing. What on earth would I gain? I've lost my plants. I am losing my wife and daughter, and now it looks like I'm losing my position here. Of course I was unhelpful."

"Simon, do sit down." In the heavy silence, he obeyed. Geering's eyes softened. "What has happened to the quiet, competent, plant enthusiast you were a year ago? You know my philosophy. We run a tight ship, and I am proud of where we've come from and where we're going. I am sorry you've had this *experience*, as you call it. It has left you disorientated and disturbed." The professor leaned forward and tapped his desk. "Now, please relax with your family over the holidays, and return with renewed passion for your plants. And let's have no more of this historical nonsense. We are scientists here, not historians."

Simon wanted to scream. *It's not nonsense.*

Geering's veiled threat hung over Christmas like a sword of Damocles, but Ruby looked stronger every day. The latest chemo seemed to have worked, for the moment. Simon's emotions rose and fell with her health.

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On Christmas Day they visited Alan and Jan, now in their sixties, still in the same house in Stroud. It reeked of elderly dogs.

Caitlin had returned from Ireland. "Ah, it is good to

be home. We've some Irish Guinness in 'specially."

"This place is disgusting," Kathy said, not so quietly that her mother-in-law wouldn't hear.

Jan stooped. "Hello, young Ruby, how are you doing?"

Simon smiled. "She's getting better, Mum."

Kathy looked around for a space to put down bags. "Only since we got a nurse. Where are we sleeping?"

Simon couldn't tell his parents about Solomon. Unsettled, he tramped up the old paths onto Rodborough Common, his trysting place, where he used to ride Buttons. Brindled cattle defecated in steaming heaps, pungent in the frigid air. Cobwebs hung like jewels from the dead grass.

What had the report said? *Paranoid. Delusional psychosis*. An image of Ahumm and Abinadab came with immense clarity. He rubbed the scar in his stomach. No, he wasn't inventing that.

Granny and Granddad Smith lost everything in the war and yet seemed to enjoy a peaceful companionship he and Kathy had never known. *Why?*

You think you know someone so well, and suddenly they are not there. Physically present, emotionally gone. *Should I talk to friends?* He didn't

have many—except the dead plants and Michael in history.

Simon dug out the Bible. Fascinated, he sat in the winter sunshine and read the stories of Jewish history, the only reality. He must lay it aside, but only these pages offered any peace. Here, at least, he could understand and be understood.

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Back at home in Cam, he searched for King Solomon on the internet, but found little, except bizarre legends involving magic and witchcraft. *What is truth anyway?*

As a scientist, he accepted nothing until tested and verified. How do you verify history? You can't repeat it. Archaeological remains are evidence, but of what? Archaeologists disagree and seem to change their opinions annually.

Perhaps he'd dismissed these issues in the past because they didn't fit with scientific method. But how could he make sense of what had happened and the stories he was now reading? The millennium was about to end. Maybe his troubles would too.

Simon headed to Dursley library and hunted for books on Solomon. "Yes," he said, picking up a



volume. He grinned as he walked out. There was no point in going home. Perhaps Helen would understand? He drove to her small terrace and knocked.

"Simon. This is a nice surprise. What are you doing here?" A pair of cats rubbed her legs.

"Can I come in? I hope it's not inconvenient?"

Over coffee, Simon waved his book. "Look what I found in the library. *King Solomon*, by Frederic Thiéberger. I had to show you. It looks a bit dated, but I'm sure will be helpful. I also bought a Bible as you suggested. There are pages about Solomon. It's amazing. It claims he was the richest man to have lived."

"I thought that was Croesus?"

"Helen, listen, he was one of the world's first scientists. He researched the plants and animals, and people came from all over the world to hear his results."

She studied him for a few seconds, frowning in concern. "Didn't Geering warn you not to continue with all this?"

"I know, but I can't leave it alone. I've got to know what happened. It's driving me insane. The odd thing

is, whenever I read about it—the history, I mean—I feel both excited and at peace. I can't really explain." He paused. "Except everything else is a mess." *Like Kathy coming home wafting unfamiliar scent.*

"Simon, you are a good scientist, and a good colleague. We don't want to lose you. Or at least I don't. Geering will do whatever he feels necessary to run his tight ship. Brice wants your job, but he'd be awful. It would be very lonely without you. Please, take my advice. Drop all this now before it's too late. Don't let it become an obsession, Simon."

He weighed the book in his hand. "No, you're right. It's all poppycock. I must be a good boy." He stood. "My plants are all dead, Helen. Dead. Don't you understand? . . . Thank you for listening. You've been most kind."

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Simon spent the next two days engrossed in Thieberger. He read until he fell asleep. One night after his eyes closed he found himself in a great pavilion, like the one in Ezion Geber, with carpets, blue silk wall hangings, and oil lamps. He was aware of his own body asleep under an embroidered cover. He saw

himself from above. Despite the black beard and thick hair, he knew it was still him.

A fragrance of incense and spices filled the tent. One of the lamps was brighter than the others and appeared to grow until it dominated the room. The brightness mesmerized him in its purity and whiteness. He prickled with goose pimples of fear.

The light called to him, but it seemed natural, expected even. "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

He was overcome with a deep desire to know the truth, to know men, to understand the world. What is reality? How can he tell right from wrong? The scientist in him cried out, "Tell me the truth."

The light whispered. "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches, or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches, and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have."

Simon awoke puzzled, but unafraid. A strong scent

of incense pervaded the bedroom. Was the light speaking to him, or to Solomon? His mind ran over the words. He'd only just read them in the Bible. In the dream he was Solomon, but was also watching him. Surely, he was losing his mind? And yet that peace came again.

Was he about to return to history? The idea filled him with both fear and nervous anticipation. He turned to Kathy.

She'd slept beside him each night, with her back turned.

At breakfast, Kathy said, "Simon, I'm taking Ruby and returning to Dursley Park. I'll come back for our personal items. We're leaving now, all of us." When they'd gone, Simon sat solemnly, alone. How could he return to Dursley Park, to his wife's lover, who would greet him with a political smirk: "Hello, old chap, and what can we do for you?" Cuckold was the word, wasn't it? The thought made him sick. Then livid. Totally impossible.

How could he not go? It took him four days to pluck up courage. He drove, sweating, to Henley's mansion. Its great chimneys thrust into the sky as if the house had been stabbed with a dozen swords. He wished it

had.

He parked outside the entrance, gritted his teeth, and pressed the bell.

After an age, it opened just enough to reveal a stony face. "Aye?"

Simon's courage was already withering. "I'd like to see Kathy and Ruby, please. I'm her father."

"They're away." The door clumped.

He returned the next day. They were still away. He searched for Henley's phone, but it was unlisted. Desperate, he handed a letter to the stony face. "Can you give them this, please?"

A hand took it wordlessly, and the door closed once more. Like a chapter of his life. His trips to Dursley became less frequent after the housekeeper stopped answering. He was furious that his own MP had kidnapped his family. He called the police.

"Is she there against her will, Mr. Archer? No? Well, I'm sorry, sir, but there's been no crime committed."

He tried Social Services. "My wife has gone off with my daughter. What rights do I have?"

"Simon David Archer did you say? Unfortunately he is recorded as 'missing, presumed dead.' Who are you, then?"

Had he lost them forever?

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The frosts of winter melted into the buds of spring. It was Ruby's eleventh birthday. He left her gift outside Henley's front door and booked a flight to Tel Aviv.