

## Chapter 13

*Tel Aviv, Israel, April 2000*

Passport control at Ben Gurion airport was heaving. Simon checked his watch again, fidgeting his feet. "Don't expect a warm welcome," the Shabak man had said, but Israeli Security hadn't seen his passport. Surely he'd be okay.

He stepped forward and the immigration officer stared, checking his beardless photo. Simon tried to look calm.

"Is this your first visit to Israel?"

Simon nodded. Well, it was the first on this passport, but the lie still prickled his scalp.

The officer narrowed his eyes. "How long will you be here?"

He had no plans at all. He just knew he needed to be in Israel. "Two weeks," he said.

"Where will you stay?"

"In Jerusalem." He couldn't return to Eilat.

The officer smiled and stamped. "Have a nice stay." Simon stood frozen. "Oh. Thank you." He forced

his legs to move.

He rented a car and climbed through the gorge into the Judaeen Hills. Cresting a rise, he came at last to Jerusalem. His heart quickened. Something would happen here, he knew.

The whole city seemed to be made of mellow stone. Near the Old City he found a small guest house and ate a large dinner at the YMCA.

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In the morning, Old Jerusalem drew him like a magnet. The ancient walls towered above him, a city that had been here forever. Simon was awed at so much history. Inside the Jaffa Gate, tourists crowded guides or sipped coffee on broad pavements. A banner advertised the recent visit of the Pope.

He bought a map and plunged into the labyrinth of alleys. Men in strange hats hustled past. Stalls selling fruit, souvenirs, clothing, and jewelry fought for space with tiny cafes. Soon lost, he slowed.

"You want guide, sir?"

Simon looked down at a fresh-faced lad of about twelve. The boy grinned. "I show you Western Wall. City of David. Temple Mount." He set off at great

speed, Simon's long legs struggling to keep pace. They reached an open square, guarded by security gates.

Huge ashlar comprised the foundation of the Western Wall, above them smaller blocks, less well formed. A worshipper stuffed a piece of paper into a crack in the old masonry.

"Is that Solomon's temple?" Simon felt awkward at his lack of knowledge.

"No, sir. The big stones are platform for Herod's temple. They go underground, very far. You want to see?"

"Where is Solomon's temple? Is it on the Temple Mount?"

"No, sir. Only two mosques are there. We can go now. It's free."

"Then what happened to the temple that Solomon built?"

"Oh, it was broken by the Bad Romans in 586 BC." The lad smiled proudly. *Did he mean Babylonians?* "Then Herod built a bigger one, but that was also broken. These stones on top were by the other Romans. Then the Muslims came." He pointed over to his right. "Over there is City of David. Hezekiah's Tunnel. You want to see?"

“Is that where they lived? David and Solomon? Yes, let's go there.”

Burning in the sunshine, he bought them ice creams and joined the queues tramping over excavated ruins. Backyards, rubbish bins, and plastic washing lines mingled with stones 3,000 years old.

Where was Solomon in all this? The young man in his dreams, the authoritative king, seemed a million miles away. Why on earth had he come? He paid his guide and returned to his room, depressed.

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The following morning the phone woke him.

“Mr. Archer? This is the landlady. There is someone to see you.” He checked his watch. Six am. *What the . . .* He threw on some clothes.

Two men stood in the doorway. “Are you Simon Archer?”

He nodded.

The older man flashed an ID. “Come with us, please.”

Simon couldn't read Hebrew. “Excuse me. Who are you?”

“We are from the General Security Service.

Shabak.”

Simon began to sweat. He followed them to the street. They opened the back door of a white Toyota. He sat beside another policeman. The locks clunked. They stopped outside a plain, six-story building in the newer part of the city. Simon followed down a corridor and into a small room, bare except for a low table and a single chair. It smelled of disinfectant.

“Sit.”

One of them brought coffee. He passed a cup to Simon. Both men had shaved heads and wore denim jackets.

“Okay. You were here six months ago without passport or visa. You were warned not to return. Yet, here you are, back again already.” The older officer stood in front of him, hands in his pockets. “We are not stupid, Mr. Archer. It is clear you are involved in something to harm the nation of Israel. It is our job to protect our country from people like you.”

A man entered wearing a white coat and latex gloves. He locked the door. Simon wanted to vomit. He swallowed.

“So first, we check you for drugs. Then X-ray for explosives. Our team is searching your room.

Whatever you are up to, we will find out. Please take off your clothes."

Simon stripped to his underpants. The men examined his clothing, wallet and keys.

"Now the rest." He nodded at his underwear.

"Please. Why?" Shivering, Simon obeyed.

White-coat approached. "Lie on your side on the table. Raise your knees."

Simon closed his eyes and waited for the invasion.

They didn't touch him. He shivered again. What was going on?