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Eleventh Guest

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*We dedicate Eleventh Guest to Poppy Irwin,
much-loved daughter of Jesse and Rebecca Irwin.*

*Nineteen weeks of Life on earth.
Forever alive in heaven with Jesus.*

MATTHEW 6:28-30

I AM the vine; you are the branches.

JOHN 15:5

Prologue

LONDON, PRESENT DAY

A steady downpour drenched London and slowed noon traffic to a crawl. Shimon Sachar gazed out the bus window at a canopy of black umbrellas. The pedestrians packing the sidewalks of Oxford Street moved faster than the red Number 10 bus.

Alfie Halder stood and lumbered toward the exit as the bus slowed and stopped across from Selfridges Department Store.

The old man ducked his head and grinned over his shoulder at Shimon. Though Alfie was always pleasant, Shimon had rarely seen him excited. Today his eyes glistened with childlike anticipation. “Eben Golah! Eben Golah,” he murmured again and again.

They inched forward amid the throng on the bus.

Outside, opposing black conveyor belts of umbrellas flowed east toward Oxford Circus and west toward Marble Arch. Except for the occasional moving punctuation point of a Burberry pattern or a floral print, the pedestrians might have been stationary.

“Too slow. Too slow,” Alfie declared.

The interior of the bus smelled of wet wool overcoats and over-liberal applications of cologne. At least the rain reduced the choking cloud of diesel fumes Shimon always associated with London.

Would they be late to the meeting?

The headlines of a crumpled London newspaper screamed from the floor beneath Shimon's shoes: *DIVIDED JERUSALEM?*

It seemed Israel's right to exist had been betrayed. The American president, who openly negotiated with and supported Islamic regimes, wielded a political sledgehammer, dictating an Israeli policy of appeasement: *If you want our continued support, America now declared to Israel, you will abandon the Golan Heights and everything back to the pre-1967 boundaries.*

Back to indefensible borders.

Destruction of the Zion Covenant, sealed by the blood of six million Jewish martyrs, was imminent.

The words *Never Forget* were now to be forgotten. The new American policy assured that the Jewish battle to keep Jerusalem as the eternal, undivided capital of Israel was as good as over. Israel's right to survive was a bone tossed to Islamic terrorists in exchange for "peace."

How many generations had died for the sake of a Jewish homeland? What would be left of Eretz-Israel after politicians carved it up?

Shimon's wife and mother had both died in an Islamic homicide bombing in Jerusalem.

Shimon pictured his wife's face, pale and lifeless, as the mortuary attendant had lifted the sheet so Shimon could identify her body. A single bolt from the homemade slaughtering device had pierced Susan's right temple. Such a small wound for such an enormous soul to escape through. Susan's eyes, half open in death, had gazed at something beyond him. Her lips were parted in a gentle smile. Her death had seemed incomprehensible. "*Susan? Get up! This cannot be happening!*" His voice commanding her to get up and live was without effect. His words of acceptance seemed to belong to someone else. "*This is Susan Sachar . . . my wife. . . .*"

That had occurred only a few years earlier. Now talk of dividing Jerusalem and surrendering more Jewish territory to Islamic terrorists was reality . . . and incomprehensible to Shimon.

Who would lift the sheet and identify what was left of Israel?

Shimon kicked aside the newspaper and wondered if this strange encounter with his father's old friend might shed some light on the future.

"Eben Golah," Alfie chanted. "Eben . . ."

Doors slapped back, disgorging passengers. Umbrellas popped open. They stepped down and melted into the current of the damp, Oxford Street crowd.

Alfie's head towered over the surging mob. The old man lifted his umbrella and peered out from beneath the rim. Spotting Shimon again, he called out, "Come on, boy! Shimon! Hurry! Eben Golah! You'll see. He'll be there. Waiting."

Shimon fingered the slip of yellow legal paper with the address.

*St. Mark's Church
N. Audley St.
London*

The old church was only one block away from the American Embassy. Shimon had heard about the place, though he had never been there. Shimon's father, Moshe, had often mentioned a man named Eben Golah. Moshe said that miracles happened in St. Mark's, North Audley, but when pressed for details, he had shrugged and said perhaps one day he would explain.

Time ran out. The story of the St. Mark's miracle and clues to the true identity of Eben Golah were buried with Moshe Sachar.

Shimon had once previously met Golah, also in London. Much about the man remained a mystery—such as how a 1941 comrade of Shimon's father could be in his eighties and yet appear to be a youthful thirty.

The mystery was increased by the recent, urgent summons to return to London. A packet had arrived in Jerusalem, addressed:

*To Shimon Sachar,
son of Moshe and Rachel Sachar*

In it were two tickets from Israel to London for Shimon and Alfie and a time and date to meet at St. Mark's Church. The message was signed *Eben Golah*.

Now Alfie shouted, "Shimon! Come on! Don't want to keep him waiting. Eben Golah. I been waiting a long time to meet him. Come on!"

They left Oxford Street and headed down North Audley toward the American Embassy. The crowds diminished and the fervor of the

rain increased. A torrent hissed from the sky and sluiced off the roof tiles until the buildings gushed miniature waterfalls.

Every doorway Alfie and Shimon passed was packed with people seeking shelter. The entryway of an Italian restaurant was jammed with those who had a sudden urge to get inside. Refugees from the rain mingled with others who had changed their minds about leaving.

“Come on,” Alfie urged again. The old man trudged forward, oblivious to the downpour. “Almost there.”

Shimon hunched his shoulders deeper into his raincoat. When he unwisely tilted his umbrella to locate their destination, a jet of cold water poured down his collar. Alfie, as usual, was correct. The columns of the portico loomed just ahead, but so did an unexpected barrier.

“What’s this?”

Shimon blinked to clear his eyes. His father had described the St. Mark’s steps as once enclosed by wrought-iron railings. Then he had explained how the iron had been removed during a 1940 wartime scrap-metal drive.

How had they reappeared?

A few paces closer revealed the truth: The entryway was blocked by a three-sided, chain-link enclosure. Signs warning against trespassing competed for space with handbills offering the secrets of Tibetan meditation and invitations to a retrospective showing of the greatest vampire films of all time.

“This can’t be right,” Shimon muttered aloud. “All the way from Jerusalem . . . boarded up?”

Alfie seemed undeterred. “Eben Golah said. Meet him here, he said. So here he will be.” Methodically Alfie grasped the chain-link and rattled each juncture where an eight-foot-high section of fence met another.

In the center of the barricade was a narrow gate, chained and padlocked. Alfie grasped the lock and pulled downward. It fell open in his hand. “Come on,” he urged. “It’s open. See?”

Shimon looked up and down the block for police cars and witnesses, but the elderly man had already disappeared into the gloom beneath the overhang.

Shimon climbed the steps as Alfie searched for the way into the building. Massively tall double gates, designed to accommodate the ebb and flow of an enormous Sunday congregation, offered access through the center of the portico.

They were locked. Impassable. To the left, however, was an entryway sized for everyday use. Alfie pushed the door inward and it squealed open at his touch. “Not bolted,” he offered, slipping in.

Shimon hesitated outside. The interior of the narthex was unlit and visible only by the thin streak of light admitted by the partially open portal. The passage leading to the sanctuary proper looked like a cave entrance.

Alfie again scolded him for lagging behind. Shimon shrugged and stepped over the threshold. After all, he reasoned, a church—even a derelict one in the center of London—could scarcely be as intimidating as the tunnels beneath Jerusalem.

The foyer was empty . . . emphatically so. Alfie’s shoes squished and creaked, but Shimon’s heels clattered unnervingly loudly on the black-and-white marble tiles and echoed from the vaulted ceiling. Even the walls were unadorned, except where bare patches of paint brighter than the rest announced where bulletin boards and memorial plaques once hung.

“Alfie,” Shimon said with a hiss, “wait for me.” Then, struck by irony, he mused aloud, “What am I whispering for?”

“A holy place.” Alfie grasped Shimon by the wrist and pulled him forward into the gloomy interior. Shimon allowed himself to be led down the center aisle, reasoning that Alfie must see much better in the darkness than he could himself.

If the narthex was spacious, then the sanctuary was monumental in scope. Even as Shimon’s eyes adjusted to the murkiness, his view was carried farther and farther eastward toward the high altar. On the way there his inspection went up and up and up, past a gallery ringing the auditorium, to end in shadows too deep to penetrate.

Enough illumination entered from the storm-shrouded skies to display stained-glass windows—scenes of David and Moses and prophets whom Shimon couldn’t instantly recognize.

Another stained-glass panel, too dark to make out, topped the altar. The torrent of rain continued to pound on the roof like the fists of some living thing wanting to get in.

Shimon shuddered and turned to look back toward the light glowing dully through a window above the choir loft at the rear of the auditorium. He backed toward the altar in order to get a better view of an enormous stained-glass window that illuminated the loft. The figure of

Jesus, many times life-size, was central to the composition. The exterior light was too dim to distinguish any additional details.

At that moment something stirred in the shadows at the base of the west window. A portion of the darkness in the loft moved and separated itself from the rest.

“Shalom, Shimon Sachar and Alfie Halder,” a deeply resonant voice called. “Come up.” The words echoed and multiplied until the command came from all directions.

“What?” Shimon gasped.

“Maybe angels, eh?” Alfie said with a smile. “But also could be Eben. Shalom, Eben! How do we get up there?”

“The foyer,” the disembodied voice ordered. “Turn left. Stairs behind the pillar.”

Alfie lurched ahead of Shimon into the foyer. Shimon followed more slowly. What did he really know about this man, Eben Golah? What lay behind the cryptic summons and the—Shimon groped for the right word—*unusual* choice of rendezvous?

What drew him onward was Golah’s association with his father. Despite being privy to many of Moshe’s secrets, there was still so much Shimon did not know but wanted to be able to encompass.

He felt his way around the circumference of a pillar, guided more by the tramp of Alfie’s ascending steps over his head than by his own limited vision. Could Alfie somehow see in the dark?

A staircase led upwards into even thicker gloom. A glimmer of light revealed a landing. The faint gleam glinted in an oversize mirror on the wall. Antique, with its silvering faded and streaked, the mirror offered the appearance of an old photograph, even a tintype. Shimon’s reflection rose into view and grew in size. He stopped short in front of it. It seemed to be his father’s face he saw before him, yet not the elderly Moshe. Unconsciously Shimon’s hand rose to his cheek and tugged. It was a gesture he had seen Moshe employ often.

The mirror . . .

A young Moshe Sachar peered back at Shimon—Moshe as he would have appeared if he had stood in this church sixty years earlier. A dark comma of hair fell across a worried forehead above narrowed dark eyes. A prominent nose surmounted a mouth twisted into a wry expression.

Shimon rocked back on his heels with that thought. Moshe *had* been in this church many decades before, perhaps had climbed these very

stairs past that same mirror. Moshe had been in this church during the war against the Nazis. Moshe had been in this church when the first postwar discussions of the resurrection of Israel had taken place here.

Is that what this meeting was about?

Shimon shook his head, and Moshe in the mirror offered the same disagreement. *There is more to this than you can even imagine*, his father's image seemed to argue.

Shimon took the rest of the steps two at a time, ascending two more flights before emerging on the level of the choir loft.

Alfie was already beneath the huge stained-glass window, beside Eben Golah, whose name he kept repeating over and over with delight. Shimon advanced to meet his father's old friend, but the words of greeting died on his lips. He was struck again by the same doubts as at their first encounter.

The man smiling beside Alfie must be an imposter. He appeared to be in his thirties, younger than Shimon, in fact. His face was unlined, his shoulders erect, though below Alfie's in height. A globe of wiry, light-colored hair topped a high, broad forehead, giving his head a too-large appearance for his thin neck.

Could it be this was not his father's old colleague, but rather the son of that man? If so, why the deception?

"Shalom, Shimon Sachar . . . son of Moshe. I always recognize your father in you. What a friend he was! Thank you for coming on such short notice."

Alfie's head bobbed. "You see! Eben Golah. Told you he'd be here."

Lightning flashed in the south, illuminating a row of arched, clear glass windows in the upper gallery. The boom of thunder followed, rattling the building.

"Right above us," said Alfie, rolling his eyes heavenward.

The image of the sanctuary burned on Shimon's retinas. High marble pillars supported interior archways like bridges made of polychrome bricks.

Eben Golah blinked at the flare as if some memory was jarred loose by the crack of thunder. He said quietly, "I was here with your father the night the bombs fell and shattered those windows. The prophets were all there in a row. How Lucifer hates this church. But the stick of bombs missed, you see. The church survived the Blitz. But the prophets in their alcoves shattered into a million pieces. We swept them up and

your father . . . ah, well. It was long ago.” Eben smiled and sat down on the dark rose-colored pew in the choir loft. With a wave of his hand he invited Alfie and Shimon to join him.

Shimon felt his breath catch at the implication of Eben’s words. He would not ask, but the question burned in his mind: How could this young man have known his father?

Alfie steadied Shimon with a massive hand on his shoulder. “Your Papa told you, Shimon . . . he said to you . . . miracles happened in St. Mark’s, North Audley. Eh? Sit down. Sit down. By and by you’ll know.”

Without thinking, Shimon grasped Eben’s hand firmly and then released it. It was solid flesh. Eben was human, not spirit. Not angelic either, unless angels named Eben wore Levis and Nike tennis shoes.

A renewed cloudburst rumbled on the roof.

Eben remarked, “You are very much like him, you know.”

Shimon lowered his chin in acknowledgment. Thoughts of seeing his father’s face reflected in the mirror’s image of himself cascaded through his mind. He answered, “You were old friends. Old. I knew that much.”

The corners of Eben’s thin lips turned up in amusement. “Yes.”

“Why here? Why not in Jerusalem?”

“Because the missing piece . . . what you look for is right here.”

Outside the church the clouds must have parted before the westerling sun. In an instant light streamed through the window like the music of angels caroling.

Alfie sat transfixed as the face of Jesus, luminous, seemed to smile down upon the trio in the choir loft. The old man lifted his fingers in greeting and said, “Hey . . . it’s him.”

Eben nodded once. “I was sure of it the first time I laid eyes on the face.”

Shimon wondered when that moment had taken place. Last year? A century ago?

“Yes,” Eben declared with certainty, sending a chill through Shimon. “Look upon him. It is Yeshua.” Then Eben asked, “Shimon, son of Moshe, look around you. What do you see?”

Shimon obeyed, drinking in the shifting hues.

The face of Yeshua the King, returning to reign, glowed bright above the seven golden candlesticks of the seven churches. A serpent twined around the third lampstand from the left. The words in Revela-

tion 2 sounded plainly in Shimon's memory: "*I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast to My name and you did not deny My faith. . . .*"¹

On the base of this particular candlestick was a small golden pelican. Few beyond the artist would notice such an obscure detail. The pelican was said to pierce its own breast for blood to feed its young. The bird was an ancient symbol of Jesus offering His life so others might live.

The bejeweled breastplate worn by the image of Jesus cast variegated pools of color on the warm, red wood of the pews, and on the trio of men. "*He put on righteousness as a breastplate. . . .*"²

A golden grapevine adorned the robes of the coming King and reached out green and living tendrils onto the walls of Jerusalem. "*I AM the vine; you are the branches.*"³

Puddles of blues and greens formed on the black-and-white checkered floor, and a single brilliant shaft of gleaming white beamed down on the open Bible on the altar.

The interior of the church brightened as if someone outside had thrown a switch and focused floodlights on the stained glass. The storm broke. Darkness fled. Wood and stone and glass became radiant. Sunlight passing through colored panes transformed intangible energy into visions of history and prophecy.

Details of windows that had been obscured by the clouds became vivid. Above the gold-paneled altar directly opposite the Revelation window, Christ suffered agony on the cross. On either side of the cross were angelic creatures described in the book of Revelation.

There was no corner of the church that did not proclaim God's love for man. How could language describe it all?

Shimon chose his words carefully. "This building . . . it is the story of what was and . . ." He faltered. A holiness, a spiritual presence was in this place, making it difficult for Shimon to speak. Awe silenced him.

Eben fixed his eyes on the face of Christ and whispered, "What was . . . and what is. And what will be. Look there—the vision of Ezekiel and Revelation. What will be . . ."

The whole story of the end of history was there, though it would take years to read each visual detail: End of Days. Second Coming. Seven seals. The angels. Prophecy was recorded in glass and stone—some obvious; some secrets concealed, obscured.

Eben gestured up to the full height of the hammerbeam ceiling.

Round windows were positioned high so light could flood down from above. Blacked out, painted over during the Blitz; no one had ever bothered to remove the paint and restore the interior clarity after the war.

Eben continued, “But look closely: The Star of David pattern in each circle remains visible beneath the blackout paint. In this place, 125 years before Israel was reborn, someone wove the prophecy of the last days and the rebirth of the nation of Israel into the fabric of this building. Your father was part of the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Star of David crowns St. Mark’s.”

Shimon remembered what scant facts his father had given him about St. Mark’s, North Audley, “The American Church.” It was the church where Eisenhower had worshipped during the planning of D-day. Where American soldiers, destined to die in battle, had written their last letters home. Where Eleanor Roosevelt prayed before she met with the first UN members in 1947 to develop the establishment of the State of Israel.

The crown on the head of the victorious Christ glinted as the sunlight passed through it. Colors shifted, revealing new details in the stone.

“A treasure.” Eben hummed and traced Hebrew letters intertwined in the carving of a wood panel. “*Nune. Sheen. Gimel.* ‘To reach; to lay hold of.’ And by the reverse, ‘Goshen—the fertile land where the Almighty sheltered his children in Egypt.’ So let us lay hold of a great blessing, eh?”

Shimon shook his head in disbelief at the Hebrew anagram. Backwards and forwards the word was significant. Who had carved the message into the panel? “Will it . . . will this . . . be lost?”

“Lost? Not lost. The end is within reach. The goal is in sight. We will take hold of the Truth. It is finally attained. St. Mark’s is the gate, the portal between the past and the present.”

Shimon understood the significance. Two blocks north was the old Roman highway by which the first converts to Christianity had carried the gospel throughout Roman Britain. Linked to modern history and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the American Embassy in London was two blocks south of the church.

Eben rested his hand on the carving. “America’s spiritual fortress in the northern boundary of the ancient Roman Empire. It is no surprise that this week the church is closed as America yields to great evil. This is none other than the gate of heaven, the dwelling place of the Lord

in this outpost. The men who built it understood. The land beneath this church was deeded and dedicated to stand as the house of God in perpetuity . . . 'til the end. The End. You understand, don't you?"

"And if it is destroyed?" Shimon paused and waited for the answer.

"The future is written in the Book, is it not? What was. What is. What will be. Even this—" Eben swept his hand around the chamber—"even this is a sign."

Eben stood and faced west, gazing up at the window portraying the Second Coming. By a slight inclination of his head, he commanded Shimon and Alfie to also rise. He bowed slightly, touching his forehead as he enacted greeting the Messiah. In an ancient Hebrew dialect, which startled Shimon by the ease with which it was uttered, Eben whispered the prophecy of Daniel: "*Behold, on the clouds of heaven came one like the Son of Man, and there was given to Him dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. And His dominion is everlasting and shall not pass away. . . .*"⁴

Then Eben said quietly, "Shimon, you are an archaeologist. A linguist specializing in ancient language. You recognize first-century Hebrew spoken, like your father did. And Greek . . . it is elementary to you, eh? Hebrew, the language of secrets revealed. Greek, the language of mathematics, of proportion, of beauty. Complex. So tell me what language you read in the picture of Christ before you."

Shimon scanned the patterns in the stained glass. "It is . . . not so simple. A lifetime of study. A theme is here, certainly in the repetition of the geometric patterns. A doctoral thesis, possibly more than one, on the symbolism and meaning in the portrait."

Eben concurred. "You see, yes." He then spoke in fluid, melodic Greek. "*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet. . . . Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around His chest.*"⁵

Shimon blinked up at the image in the window. "The passage . . . this . . ." He faltered as visions crowded out coherent thought.

Eben said, "Language integral to the picture in the glass itself. More than art. It's prophecy. One letter, especially—a Greek letter within the glass—defines this church. Just as every measurement recorded in the

ancient Tabernacle and in the construction of Solomon's Temple had significance. Can you find it?"

Shimon's eyes narrowed as he pondered the challenge and the narrative in the artwork. "Yes. It tells a story . . . the story of the End of Days. But far too much to summarize."

"Then begin with the obvious." Eben's gaze locked on the face of Jesus and His crown. "Plain language."

Shimon followed Eben's eyes to the two golden Greek letters woven into the halo around the crowned head of Christ. He raised his brows in surprise. Suddenly he understood Eben's premise. He answered, "I see *alpha* and *omega* in gold. *Alpha*: first letter in the Greek alphabet. *Omega*: last letter. Eternity. Beginning and End. The first and among the last words of Christ in Revelation . . ." Shimon paused and spoke the phrase in Greek, which sounded awkward and childlike compared to Eben's mastery of the ancient tongue. "*I am the Alpha and the Omega.*"

The omega letter in the glass was small. With its footed arch, like a golden horseshoe standing upright, perhaps it would be noticed only by a trained eye.

Eben instructed again in fluid original Greek, "*Jesus said, 'I AM the Alpha and Omega.'*"⁶ The enigmatic guide reverted into modern English without trace of an accent. "Common enough in religious art, but this is only the smallest *omega* in St. Mark's. *Omega*. Shaped like a gate. The letter proclaims a passage out of time. The end of time, as we know it. The beginning of something new: eternity." Eben opened his arms to embrace the scene all around them. "Now look out over the sanctuary. Tell me what you see. Or rather, what do you read in the walls of this building?"

Clouds now dispersing, the afternoon light illuminated a geometric masterpiece, a perfect example of the golden mean: the floor plan of the sanctuary. The ratio of the lofty ceiling to the length of the nave, the proportions of the windows . . . mathematicians back to Pythagoras would revel in its symmetry.

But there was much, much more. The span and height of the warm interior were supported by a multilayered pattern of brick archways—one archway built atop another. From top to bottom, walls and window frames looked very much like a series of Roman bridges stacked upon one another, or the model of an ancient aqueduct built to carry water

to a desert place, or a series of gates opening into the walled city of Jerusalem.

And within the multiples of tiered archways were some that had been clearly embellished to portray the Greek letter *omega*.

In Hebrew, Eben quoted the first words of the Messiah in the Book of Revelation: “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. . . . Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches.’*”

Alfie gasped. “I see it all right,” he cried. “Look! There’s one . . . and there and there. Everywhere.”

Shimon summarized: “A geometric masterpiece. An Escher woodcut. No beginning and no end. The *omega*. Embedded in the stone structure in plain sight, yet concealed to the inattentive eye. The entire building is a three-dimensional representation—a celebration of the letter *omega*—written by the architect in brick and stone. Was this representation of the *omega* the conscious intent of the architect? It exists. It is fact. The stones bear witness.”

“Well spoken,” Eben said in a clipped tone, like a schoolmaster congratulating a student who finally understood the most basic of lessons.

Next, Eben led the way back down the dark stairs to the center aisle of the sanctuary. In the exact middle of the hall he turned and raised his right hand to where light streamed through the vision of the Second Coming portrayed in the Revelation window. The sheen on the pews just beneath it in the choir loft transformed the wood into a series of steps leading down from the feet of Jesus.

Powerful beams of white sunlight focused through three small arched windows set high in the wall.

In front of the Revelation window a central brick archway seemed suspended in air, forming the perfect *omega*. The Second Coming window floated in the exact center of the arch. The King seemed poised to descend and enter through this gate.

It was Alfie who said what Shimon was thinking: “A prophecy.”

Shimon shivered at the implication. Now he spotted the *omega* everywhere he looked! Geometrically proportionate, the construction of the building had no visual beginning place and no end. Eastward, above the high altar, three tall arches framed scenes of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. These images in glass would glow brilliantly each day with the rising of the sun.

Moving clockwise, Shimon guessed that the clear windows on the south wall, stained glass blown out during the Blitz and never replaced, would have originally portrayed Hebrew prophets.

On the north wall, stories of the miracles of Christ and the apostles inhabited the transept.

West, above the entrance, the Revelation window floated high. One day the sun, which illuminated the image from behind, would set for the final time on earth's history. Then the One who is the Alpha and Omega would appear like lightning flashing from east to west.

The prophecy portrayed in the window would come true.

Alpha and Omega. Eternity. There would be no beginning and no end.

Eben concurred. "The *alpha* and the *omega* are the tangible reflection of a spiritual weight placed within the covenant on the deed of this property when the land and the building were dedicated. The church will remain a church until the end. In perpetuity. When and if the covenant is broken—a small sign, perhaps, in a world filled with so many prophecies unnoticed, yet think of it!—the covenant is broken. This house of God, the congregation evicted, a fence blocking entry, has represented the spiritual home of America in England for two hundred years."

Shimon touched the smooth wood of the pew and imagined American soldiers sitting there. General Eisenhower. Over two hundred years of American presence in this neighborhood. From the days of John Adams' service as minister to the Court of St. James in 1785 and the adoption of the American Constitution in 1787, to the present American Embassy, just a short walk from here.

Eerily, Eben seemed to read his thoughts. "Yes, Shimon. Everything means something. The history of this church parallels American history. The closing of St. Mark's at this moment. The last pastor, evicted by a broken covenant, an American."

Directly opposite, at the far end of the hall, the carved marble pulpit beneath the scene of the Crucifixion directly faced the stained-glass vision of the Second Coming. Reached by ascending twelve steps, the pulpit enclosure also contained twelve arches—a facsimile of Revelation's description of the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem.

From this position, as the pastor preached, he alone could see the depiction of the Returning Messiah.

Christ, as the Alpha and Omega, was at the backs of the congregation. Thus only the Word, proclaimed by the shepherd, could warn the flock of His imminent return.

Window by window, Eben took them on a picture tour of the stories of healing recorded in the Gospels. Nearly every miracle was portrayed.

There was, Shimon thought, something unique about the faces shining in the stained glass.

They seemed familiar, real. The windows were alive in the shifting light, like photographs of the living, rather than portrayals of the ancient dead. It was as if the artist had known Peniel, the man born blind, and the paralytic, and the cripples who had met Jesus face-to-face. The thought came to Shimon that the artist himself had somehow been touched by Jesus of Nazareth and changed forever. At each window Eben pointed out some object or symbol that was worked into the pattern. Pomegranates, grapes, figs, citron, bunches of lavender, and the pink buds of almond trees all spoke to Shimon of prophecies contained in Torah.

Was the artist Jewish? Shimon wondered.

Strangely, the windows along the south wall were clear glass. “Also blown out during the Blitz,” Eben explained. “Shattered too completely to be reassembled. Oh, the stories they could have told! But there was one . . . we saved the pieces, your father and I.”

Eben glanced over his shoulder as the sun blasted through the face of the risen Christ in the resurrection window. He bowed slightly, as if he had received a spoken order.

“It is time.” Eben turned on his heel and led Shimon and Alfie to the altar. He smiled and slid his fingers beneath the edge of the top, producing an old iron key. Inserting it into an obscure keyhole, he turned it. There followed the distinct click of the tumblers in the lock. A look of victory filled his face as he lifted the top of the altar like the lid of a child’s school desk. Inside a shallow compartment were shards of broken glass from the unrepaired windows shattered in the Nazi bombing raid. There was an old twelve-by-fourteen-inch photo of the window as it had been, depicting ten ragged lepers—eight men and two women. A solitary figure of an old man sat across from the ten with an open scroll on his lap, as if he were instructing them in Torah. They feasted at a table heaped with the bounty of Israel’s fruit: almonds and citrons and figs. Along the border of the table were

depicted a sandal, a hammer, a fish, a Torah scroll, a pomegranate, and a bunch of grapes.

Eben reached into the compartment and produced a fragment of glass with the identical image of the scroll on it.

“What does it mean?” Alfie asked.

“It means I fear the window may never be restored. The journey of the ten is almost forgotten. The eleventh? The old man? Ah, well. Who remembers him? Here is their testimony.”

Lying on the bed of glass was an aged leather portfolio secured by leather shoelaces. Stamped into the border of the cover were the same symbols portrayed in the shards of glass.

Eben explained. “Four manuscripts. Four love stories. Not as this world perceives love, but rather stories about the love that is stronger than death.” He frowned. “Shimon, it is written. If this house falls, then surely this city will fall. This church has been the repository of these manuscripts for two hundred years. A drop in the bucket. Before then? Ah, well. They have been kept safe in many other places over the last two thousand years. But now? There is a prophecy written in the covenant of this church that it would remain in use as the house of God until the end. It survived the Blitz, but it may not survive the selfishness of this generation. We believed this treasure . . . and others . . . would be safe here. We must pass this on to you for safekeeping now, in Jerusalem. Perhaps we guardians of the north have come to the end. We have been betrayed.”

“And if Jerusalem is betrayed?”

“Pity the betrayer.”

“You believe the time is near?”

“Take these documents back to Jerusalem with you. I cannot leave Britain. You know what to do, how and where to preserve the documents until the day they will be revealed.”



THE SHOEMAKER'S SON

They shall sit every man under his vine . . . and no one shall make them afraid.

MICAH 4:4

THE JOURNEY BEGINS . . .

Nine lepers and Lily, the widow of Cantor, gathered in Rabbi Ahava's stone hut in the Valley of Mak'ob. They were meant to be a minyan of ten, chosen by lot to go out in search of Yeshua the Miracle Worker. The Galilean Rabbi was said to be able to heal every disease.

Cantor's sudden death had whittled their number down from ten and disheartened the nine who remained. All but the four strong youths from Ahava's Torah school were downcast. Carpenter, who had counted on Cantor to lead them, was frightened by Cantor's unexpected absence from their task. Surely the hand of the Almighty had prevented Cantor from leaving the valley of lepers.

Carpenter explained to the rabbi, "With Cantor flown away? It's like this, Rabbi. Those of us with a few years on us—mind you, not these four youths, but the rest of the party—we're thinking maybe it's a sign. Maybe we're meant to stay Inside."

Other voices broke in while the four teenaged lads scowled.

"Aye," agreed Crusher.

"That's it," concurred the two Cabbage Sisters in unison. "Thinking it's a sign we shouldn't . . ."

Fisherman, who had grown content with a life without the uncertain sea, added, "Never was too keen on the idea of leaving the Valley."

Carpenter added, "So, if Your Honor agrees with what we're saying? Well, Rabbi, we'd rather just . . . you know."

Rabbi Ahava's wooly head bobbed as he considered their reasoning. The old man frowned. "What do you say, Lily?"

The young woman, her gaze filled with sorrow as she glanced up at the path that led Outside, responded slowly.

"I didn't want Cantor to leave the Valley. But it seems to me he wouldn't have wanted the rest of you to give up the quest just because he's not here to lead you."

Carpenter squirmed. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

The four young Torah scholars sat forward eagerly. Their leader, son of the Shoemaker who lay close to death, proclaimed, "But we're still young. Still strong! Ah, Rabbi! We've never been Outside since we were small. Since we entered. Let us go! We'll go." He included the other scholars with his sweeping gestures. "Let us go Outside on our own. If there's a Messiah, we'll find him."

Rabbi raised his hand for silence. "Fine lads, all of you. Cantor would be proud of your eagerness. You're sons of his brave heart, that's certain. But without a leader. Without Cantor or Carpenter . . ."

The widow clasped Carpenter's hand. He tried to withdraw it, but Lily clung tight and drove her words home like hammer blows. "Carpenter! Oh, Cantor loved you so. Made you second in command, just in case . . . in case something happened to him. He knew you could lead the others. Would you have turned back if he had died Outside, on the road?"

Carpenter considered her question and answered honestly. He had never considered himself a brave man. His disease had simply made him more reclusive. "I may well have done so," he admitted.

She demanded, "And what if Messiah was just over the next hill? if hope was within reach? Just a mile away? Would you have turned back?"

Crusher studied the patch of sky as if he saw the future there. "Well now, that's altogether another story."

Lily held up her clawlike left hand. "And if you knew a touch or a word could restore this? And the One we've all been waiting for was close enough for you to shout to him? to grasp his knees and not let him go until . . . until . . . ?"

Carpenter, ashamed of his willingness to stay in a familiar place and die, relented. "If you put it that way, Lily, of course we'd go on."

“Yes. Yes, Carpenter,” the young widow encouraged. “Cantor would expect it of you. Expect you all to be brave.”

Shoemaker’s Son cheered her on. “My father! What if this Messiah could make him well again? I’d go to the ends of the earth.”

Carpenter scanned the half faces of his fellow sufferers. “Sure. That’s right. Just what Cantor would say, I suppose, if he could speak. Well spoken, Lily.”

Lily leaned back against the wall.

Carpenter exclaimed, “I know. Lily can go with us! Lily can be tenth in our minyan.”

Carpenter saw Lily’s face cloud. “The baby. I can’t. Deborah is my sister. My mother. As she grows weaker, she’s becoming my child. I have no one left now but Deborah and the little ones. I can’t leave them.”

She closed her eyes, and her lips moved as though laying her case out before God. Carpenter did not interrupt. He scanned the eight who looked to him for leadership. Except for young Shoemaker’s Son, no one in the group had a loved one they must leave behind. The Cabbage Sisters had one another. Their lots had been drawn one after another, and both had been pleased they had been selected.

Rabbi Ahava agreed. “I believe you must go. Go search for him and bring him back if you find him. The Almighty always leads us out to lead us in. Those of us who remain behind will pray for you.”

Young Shoemaker’s Son put a hand to his brow. “I’m leaving my father when he would not leave me. Will you care for him, Lily?”

Cantor’s widow agreed that she would feed Shoemaker and look in on him every day.

Rabbi Ahava turned to Shoemaker’s Son. “And I, as well. You must not look back . . . only to the road . . . set your heart on finding the One we seek. I’ll take care of your father. He’s stronger than Cantor was. Perhaps this . . . sickness . . . which fills his lungs will pass and you’ll see him again, well and healthy.”

And so it was settled. These nine would go Outside in search of the Messiah.



A meadowlark sang in the brush, a strange counterpoint to their good-bye. "We're leaving, Father." Mikki, the shoemaker's son, clasped his sick father's hand as he lay wheezing on the bed of straw beneath the chalky cliff.

"Not without me." Shoemaker tried to sit and then to stand.

Mikki pushed him back and he collapsed, as weak as a kitten. "Look here. An amphora of water. Bread and vegetables to last a week. We'll be back by then. We'll bring him back with us."

The bird sang a cheerful melody. If they failed, it would mean the end of the world for the 612 in the Valley. Their lives would be forgotten. Hope would be buried in the sandy soil of the dead riverbed.

"You can't go . . . alone."

"Not alone, Father. There are nine of us. Almost ten—almost a minyan, if Cantor hadn't died last night."

"I won't let you go . . . without me." Shoemaker struggled to rise again.

"We nine, we're the strongest. We'll bring him back, Father, I promise. If we have to sneak into his camp and bind him and carry him here, we'll make him come."

Strange how the meadowlark sang from the bush while father and son parted for perhaps the last time.

"I promised her . . . you can't go without me."

Mikki was kind, always. He placed his half hand on his father's fevered brow. "Father, you have the sickness—what Cantor died from. The cough. Water in your lungs. I hear it gurgle when you breathe."

"Why?" Shoemaker's face contorted in frustration. "I'm the one who can walk without limping. I can whistle, snap my fingers. Why me? Why now?"

Mikki rubbed his eyes and gazed down on his grieving father. "Listen to me. I was chosen by the casting of sacred lots to go Outside. Me and the others. Cantor was not meant

to come with us, so his soul has flown away. Father, if you came with us, sick as you are—no matter that your feet are sound—your breathing would slow us down.”

“I could keep up. I’m the only one . . . who should be leaving this place . . . for the Outside.”

Mikki didn’t let him finish. He reasoned with his father as if Shoemaker were the child. “Listen: You would slow us down, and then you would die.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Like Cantor died. You would. I am sure of it. The Lord has chosen only nine of us to go Outside. It is only the Lord . . . by lots. And your lot was not chosen.”

“I wouldn’t die,” Shoemaker moaned, moving his head from side to side on the ragged blanket that was his pillow. “We must not . . . be separated. That’s the way we beat this demon. We stay . . . together.”

“And then we would have to stop long enough to bury you. Nine lepers on the road—that’s bad enough. The people Outside, they’ll stone us if they can. But if we have to stop and bury you?”

Shoemaker began to cough. He convulsed with hacking. His eyes brimmed with tears as he covered his mouth with a whole hand. Ten fingers. Ten toes. Why was his lot not chosen among the lepers of Mak’ob?

Mikki shook his head. “Listen, Father. Just stay and rest. Rabbi Ahava will tend to you. He promised. Lily said she will come and make certain you eat.”

“Poor thing,” Shoemaker croaked.

“Yes. She’s just buried her husband from this same thing that now burns up your lungs. And now I tell you, Father, we are close to something—reaching out for something wonderful, like nothing Israel has ever seen. Do you hear me, Father? If we can only find him!”

Shoemaker nodded. He blinked at the high rim of the Valley of Sorrows where 612 lepers dwelt perpetually. The sun was a red ball snagged in the limbs of a storm-blasted oak. “I will try to . . . keep breathing,” he surrendered, too tired to speak.

“Father.” Mikki’s voice trembled as he suddenly feared leaving his father behind. “You must not die of this thing filling your lungs. Not when the rest of your body is complete. Till now you are the strongest of us all. But clearly it must be the will of the Almighty that you stay behind. I must go and you must stay here until we bring him back. And then? Then he will heal us all.”

Shoemaker nodded and closed his eyes. The fever burned in his brain. He shivered with cold. “All right,” he gave in. “But don’t be . . . gone long. Promise me.”

The meadowlark burst from the bush and flew into the craggy rock.

“Father, please be here when I come back. We’ll bring him. We will. The nine of us. And you can be our tenth—the minyan—only you are the one who stays behind to pray.”



The eight lepers who followed Carpenter up the switchback trail were called “Faithful Minyan of Mak’ob.” Though they lacked one person to form a true minyan, these were the strongest members of the community. There were scarcely any in the Valley of Sorrows who were not missing toes or feet or legs.

Carpenter was the strongest and the only one who knew Yeshua of Nazareth. At least Carpenter had known the family long ago.

Mikki was the leader of the four boys of bar mitzvah age.

Carpenter announced, “We will invite the prophet Elijah to travel with us, eh? The prophet Elijah will be the tenth member of our minyan.”

“Carpenter, you met this Yeshua, eh? Tell us again,” chimed the Cabbage Sisters as they made their way out of the Valley to the Outside.

“Yes, Carpenter,” urged Fisherman. “Tell us what you know.”

The four Torah scholars chimed in with Crusher, the vine-grower. “Tell us. What was he like? It will help as we set our faces to this task. Finding the Messiah. A daunting task.”

Carpenter agreed. "Stories will help pass the time. This is what I know. All I can remember." He drew a deep breath of satisfaction as he recounted what he had seen and heard. "I knew the lad's father. The guild, you see. Carpenters. Yoses or Yosef—some such name. But he was the center of gossip for everyone in the guild. Something about his betrothed . . . pregnant before they married. Unusual circumstances about the child's birth. A miracle, Yosef said, but no one believed in angels. Demons were the big reality back then when Herod the Butcher King ruled." Carpenter spread his strong hands. "Well, he said an angel came to him. Said she was carrying the Messiah. 'Marry her,' the angel told him. No one believed it. But he married her anyway."

"Do you believe it?" asked Shoemaker's Son.

"Here's the thing. I met the lad later. Passover, it was. A few of us in the Carpenters' Guild traveled to Yerushalayim together. The lad was twelve years old or so." Carpenter sized up the four boys walking in a pack to his right. "Their size and age—bar mitzvah age. And this lad spent all his time in the Temple courts at Solomon's Portico, listening to the learned men. Not listening only, but discussing intelligently with them. They were amazed, these rabbis were. And the lad stayed on in Yerushalayim while we all left. Three days later his mother says, 'Where's Yeshua?' They turned back and found him where they left him: speaking with the learned doctors of the Law. Sleeping down in the quarry with the orphan boys, the link boys of Yerushalayim. One link boy became his brother in the end. Went home with the family to Nazareth, I hear. Nothing ever like this . . . wisdom . . . from the mouth of a boy. Kindness too. Everyone said so. And then he puts the Law into practice. Brings a child to his mother and father, and they adopt him."

"And then what?" asked Shoemaker's Son.

"Then I got leprosy and my nose fell off. From sticking it in other people's business, I'd guess." Carpenter laughed.

"There has to be more," Fisherman said. "What's all this about healing and miracles and such?"

Carpenter shrugged. "I know as much as you know."

Shoemaker's Son cleared his throat. "I think I saw him. I mean, I sold him sandal straps. Lots of them. If it's the same fellow."

Carpenter rubbed his forehead where eyebrows used to be. A thought struck him. "This is good. You can tell us. We'll all tell some story."

"Does it have to be true?" Fisherman was dubious.

"True? True? Of course not." Carpenter came to the fork in the road. "I've lived too long in Mak'ob to tell a good true story with a happy ending. No. I've forgotten all such stories. Just tell a good story, nu? Each of us as we go. All right. Which way would you head if you were the Messiah? Yerushalayim? Or Jericho?"

Shoemaker's Son smiled wistfully. "I'd go to Yerushalayim. The Temple Mount. Where else would the Messiah go?"

"Well spoken," agreed Carpenter. "So. We'll go to Yerushalayim and find Messiah. No doubt. No doubt. He'll be where his mother found him. If it's the same lad I remember, he'll be there, in the Temple. If he's the Messiah, we'll find him there setting things straight. Teaching Torah to the doctors of the Law, eh?"



Back in the Valley, Shoemaker opened his eyes as morning sunlight beamed through a hole in the tarp covering his shelter. He drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly without coughing. For the first time in—how many days?—the fever had broken.

He did not know for certain how long he had been ill. How many times had the kind face of the old rabbi hovered over him, praying, urging him to live?

Shoemaker sat up. He reached for the water jug and drained it dry.

Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he shook the fog of fever-induced confusion from his mind. Where was his son? Somewhere amid the haze, Shoemaker remembered a dream. . . . The boy had come to him and declared

that he was leaving Mak'ob, going Outside in search of a healer.

Shoemaker doubted the reality of this madness but still wondered where Mikki was.

The scraping and crunch of gravel announced a visitor. The quaking voice of Rabbi Ahava called, "Shoemaker? Are you still with us in the land of the living?"

Shoemaker's voice was rusty, like an unoiled hinge. "I am alive."

"Good!" The flap of the shelter was drawn back. The old rabbi's face beamed in. "You are sitting up! Good! Very good."

"I am feeling better." Shoemaker invited him in. His stomach rumbled at the smell of a warm loaf of bread. "Smells good."

"I brought you bread. Fresh."

"I'm hungry today. First time."

"Ah. If only I could smell it. I miss the smell of bread. I admit it. I do." The rabbi smiled and sat cross-legged on the woven mat. He broke the bread and blessed it as Shoemaker's mouth watered. Then he gave half to Shoemaker and began to tear off small chunks of the feast for himself.

Through a full mouth Shoemaker asked, "My son. Have you seen him?"

The bewildered expression on the rabbi's face alarmed Shoemaker. "But . . . he came to bid you farewell. Don't you remember?"

"Farewell?" Shoemaker tried to rise but found his legs still shaky. "What is it?"

"The minyan—surely you remember? You were displeased with the Lord that you were not—"

"But . . . you mean it happened? It was not a dream? They left? After Cantor died? Still they went Outside?" It all came back to Shoemaker in a rush.

"This is our choice: We either look for Messiah and bring him back, or we must be content to die without trying."

"But without Cantor . . ."

"Carpenter is the leader."

"I was willing for my boy to go Outside as long as Cantor was leading, but this . . ."

"Your son has his bar mitzvah, Shoemaker. In the eyes of Israel he is a man." The old rabbi raised his chin. "He was chosen. You were not."

"Carpenter leading? He's set in his ways. Told me he didn't care anymore if he ever left here. What kind of leader will he make?"

Rabbi Ahava contemplated his bread. "He will let the boys be men, I think. Cantor trusted him to keep their hopes up . . . keep them going."

Shoemaker reached for his sandals. "I'm going."

Ahava put a half hand on Shoemaker's arm. "You were not chosen."

"I promised . . . promised her . . . I wouldn't leave him."

"*He left you . . .*"

". . . told his mother I'd take care of him."

". . . for your sake, for the sake of all of us. He's gone to bring Yeshua of Nazareth back."

"That one. Trouble. I told my boy in Yerushalayim: Stay away from all that. There's trouble there."

"Yeshua of Nazareth. Our only hope, Shoemaker." Rabbi Ahava spoke to him kindly, like one trying to calm a frightened animal.

"The Romans. Herod Antipas. The high priest. This Yeshua is trouble for them. And trouble splashes all who get near him."

"They fear what they cannot control."

"Fear? Hate," Shoemaker corrected.

"The two grow from the same seed."

"Hate is the stronger branch. And they hate Yeshua and anyone who follows him. Maybe you've been Inside so long . . . maybe you don't know."

"Perhaps your son and the others won't be able to find him. But they must seek him. They must travel beyond their suffering, or they will not have any hope at all of living."

"Do you know what is done to lepers on the Outside?"

“So your son should stay Inside and die without trying?”

“I have to go.” Shoemaker felt a surge of energy born of fear. He reached for the daylight, clawing past the rabbi. “I promised her . . .”

Rabbi Ahava followed him slowly, emerging from the shelter and grasping his stick to stand. “You’re one of us now. You can’t leave. Your lot was not chosen. To leave this Valley without the blessing of the Almighty is dangerous. Presumptuous.”

Shoemaker waved the old man away. He scanned the steep switchback trail and mentally made note of what he would need to make a journey. Food. Water enough to travel back to civilization. “My son,” he stressed. “My boy.”



The nine lepers from Mak’ob traveled up the steep road on their way to Jerusalem in search of the Messiah.

Each evening they made camp, far from the highway. The four Torah boys gathered sticks and shrubs, and Carpenter, who carried the flint, built a fire. The sun set as they prayed for deliverance and shared their small ration of bread.

Each evening they fully intended to implement the telling of tales, but before they could begin, all nine fell into the deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

It was Shabbat, and they were still two days’ travel from their destination. The white marble of the great Temple gleamed in the distance like snow capping a mountain peak. The sun set and the Shoemaker’s Son perched on a boulder to watch the final rays brush the stones of the city with a gold and then a pink before the light faded.

The Cabbage Sisters, who were surprisingly proficient in reciting the Shabbat prayers and Torah portions, prayed over the scant meal. Their cauliflower faces beamed as they welcomed Shabbat and invoked the coming of the Shekinah to their camp.

“Dwell among your people, O Lord!”

Carpenter sighed with contentment, as if the meal had been extravagant and the prayers spoken by a sage or a prophet.

Tonight no one seemed especially weary. Fisherman turned to the Torah boys and asked, "We're here until Shabbat ends. You, Son of the Shoemaker. It seems to me I remember that you once met Yeshua. You sold him . . . laces or something?"

Mikki nodded. "Not him directly. One of his followers."

"You're the only one who would recognize him," Crusher said with envy. "I'd like to hear your story."

"What is the story you will tell us, then?" Carpenter asked. "You owe us a story."

Mikki nodded and inhaled deeply. "I wish my father were here. He's a better storyteller than I am."

"But he's not," Crusher instructed. "So you'll have to tell it."

"Is it a true story?" asked the Sisters in unison.

"Stories are hardly ever 100 percent true," the Fisherman intoned, "because we tell only what we know. Only what we see. Let the boy speak. True or not. Let him tell us the story he wants to tell."

"Where is it set?" asked the Sisters.

Mikki answered, "Yerushalayim."

The Sisters clapped their hands. "Oh, lovely. Lovely! And what is it about?"

"A family. A son. A father . . . and a friend."

Crusher leaned back against a stone. "Sounds very . . . real. Can you tell it all before the fire dies?"

The Shoemaker's Son nodded. His gaze went to the final gleam of light high on the Temple Mount and far away. "If you listen closely, you will hear the sound of the shofar."

I

CHAPTER

Mikki, son of Tycho, walked back from bar mitzvah class with his best friend, Eli. The twelve-year-old boys rehearsed the day's lessons. The bond between them was strong. They had grown up together in Jerusalem on the Street of the Shoemakers. Their families attended the same synagogue and shared the same concerns. Their fathers had known one another since they were apprenticed into the Shoemakers' Guild.

Mikki, tall and dark, towered over Eli, who was thin and pale and suffered from a lifetime battle with asthma. Mikki knew Eli was smarter in studies, but the smaller lad often remained silent because he could not breathe and recite the answers.

Today was a particularly difficult day for Eli. His breath came in short gasps. "I . . . don't know . . . if . . . if I can . . ."

Mikki finished his thought. "Don't worry. You'll just go up there and open the scroll. You know you can read Torah better than any of us."

Eli patted his chest three times and shook his head in disagreement.

"At least you understand what you're reading, eh? Not like me. Just words to me."

Eli glanced at Mikki with disapproval. He paused beside a pillar to

inhale slowly, though the shoemakers' stalls were within sight. "Drowning . . .," he gasped. With a wave of his hand he indicated Mikki should go ahead to his father's booth.

Mikki waited, pretending to study the patch of sky and the plume of smoke rising up from the daily sacrifices. "No one but you is in a hurry," Mikki said lightly.

Eli doubled over in a spasm of coughing just as Mikki heard an unexpected clamor sweep over Jerusalem's Temple Mount. The summit crowned by the gleaming white and gold sanctuary was riotous at the best of times: the discordant bleating of hundreds of sheep and goats, the blare of trumpets, the enticing cries of the sellers, the babble of pilgrims.

All these combined in a most unholy cacophony of merchandising and worship, but this sound was different. Surpassing all the rest of the tumult was the rising bellow of angry voices.

Mikki linked his arm with Eli's, helping him the rest of the way to the market stall.

Mikki's father, Tycho, owned a Temple Mount concession where Mikki's older brother, Linus, sold sandals to pilgrims. Solomon's Portico, the columned arcade defining the eastern edge of the plaza, was packed with merchants and money changers.

Besides the irate murmur, there was a distinct change in the movements of the worshippers. No longer thronging *into* the courts of worship, now the multitude flowed *out*, away from the sanctuary. Thousands of footsteps approached the Roman garrison building called the Antonia, that grim, square block planted on the northern boundary of the sacred mount. It provided an ever-present reminder to all Jews that their magnificent Temple and even their worship itself existed at the sufferance of Rome.

Eli's complexion was ashen as the boys reached the stall.

Mikki's father, an older version of his son, gave the duo only a cursory glance. Tycho stood erect from his work at the shoe last.

"What? What's going on?" Tycho asked as Mikki found Eli a bench to sit on and fetched him a cup of water.

"Eli, you know . . . trouble breathing."

"No." Tycho lowered his chin to listen as another wave of sound moved toward them. "That."

Linus, Mikki's nineteen-year-old brother, snorted. "You know what

it is, Father. Legionaries. The Court of the Gentiles is crawling with them. Maybe a fight . . . always something.”

The consensus was that the Romans—*Foul pagans that they are*, Mikki thought—had again done something to defile the Temple Mount. *Like being there at all.*

Mikki was jealous for the honor of the One God of Israel . . . and curious. He told himself that duty required he look into the disturbance.

Mikki leaned close to Eli’s ear and whispered, “I’ll go see.”

Eli, panting, grasped Mikki’s sleeve and violently shook his head in disagreement. Mikki laughed and danced away. With a grin and a broad wave he slipped into a gathering current of pilgrims.

“Stay here,” his father called. Tycho’s command came too late to address anything but his younger son’s departing shoulders.

Mikki ignored the command.

A rush of excitement surged through the boy. Tall and husky for his age, Mikki had no experience with treacherous, large crowds. He lived a sheltered and uneventful life. Rome had ruled Judea since before his birth, but Mikki had no firsthand knowledge of Rome’s brutal suppression of rebellion. Roman swords and Roman javelins seldom discriminated about whether the blood they spilled was guilty or innocent.

Mikki pressed forward. The atmosphere was charged, but Mikki did not define it as danger. He emerged from the portico into the expansive north court. The view was startling. The throng of worshippers pressed against the extremity of the Temple platform. They shook their fists in the air and shouted. It was like the sea, stirred up by a violent wind.

He was sorry Eli was unable to witness this! These were not the excited, happy gestures of pilgrims, like at the Feast of Tabernacles. For that festival, Jewish visitors to Jerusalem waved palm branches and myrtle boughs and sang joyful psalms.

Today the air of the Temple Mount crackled with anger. The object of the hostility was clear. The previously unadorned wall of the Antonia now bore bright bronze standards depicting the features of Emperor Tiberius.

Blasphemy had bloomed overnight like obscene, poisonous weeds.

“Sacilege!” a man in a brown-and-red striped robe shouted, spraying spittle over his neighbors. “No graven images! The Romans seek to defile our holy place!”

Mikki was drawn into the current like an undertow pulling him out

to sea. He tried to slip sideways toward the edge of the swelling crowd but was hemmed in.

“Sacrilege!” was the chant and “Blasphemy” was the refrain.

All around him faces were red with rage. Mikki felt his own cheeks glow with righteous fervor. He shook his fist in the air, shouting against the Roman desecration. What a story he would have to tell Eli when this day was finished!

The furious horde threatened to overflow the plaza. The gates beside the Antonia opened. A squadron of Roman legionaries marched onto the Temple Mount, spear points glittering in the morning sun.

The mixture of mob and soldiers was a heap of dry tinder. Any moment the tiniest spark would ignite the pyre.

Mikki was jostled forward and back. Those nearest the advancing Romans shrank from the threat. Latecomers shoved in behind. There was a very real danger of being crushed. Young children, the elderly, and cripples struggled to remain upright.

Cries of fear now chorused with angry shouts.

Quickly, pallor replaced fury. The reek of human fear overpowered the aromas of incense and roasting meat coming from the Temple sacrifices. If the emperor-god of Rome was angry, what would *his* soldiers sacrifice to appease *him*? A man beside Mikki clawed his way backward, trying to escape.

Mikki suddenly regretted his own stupidity. Would he fall victim to foolish curiosity? be trampled without striking a single blow for the Almighty?

Mikki was above average height, already taller than many grown men. He saw the Romans advance. So far they cleared a path using only the butts of their javelins. The absence of screams of agony meant no blood had been shed . . . yet. The centurion in command of the legionaries traversed the plaza with steely eye and forceful stride. He stopped short of the low Soreg wall that warned non-Jews to advance no farther.

Mikki heard only fragments of what ensued as the centurion addressed the crowd: “. . . not disturb your worship . . . rioting must cease . . .”

Someone in the mob blurted, “Images . . . against our law!”

Now it will happen, Mikki thought in direct contradiction to his former bravado. *The fool has given the Romans the excuse to slaughter us all.*

Confirmation appeared certain as columns of tramping soldiers burst onto the Mount from the remaining three sides of the square. Panic replaced anger as the dominant timbre of the throng's voice.

In their efforts to flee, the crowd ran into and over each other. An old woman, bent at the waist and hobbling with a cane, caught the hem of her gown beneath others' feet. She pitched forward. Mikki caught her arms and held her amid the press. Using his elbows he kept a space clear for her to catch her breath.

From over the heads of the surging mob he thought he heard someone call his name. He strained to see. "Linus?" he shouted, but his cry was lost amid the clamor.

A new figure joined the drama. From his offices in the midst of the Temple buildings loped High Priest Caiaphas. His clothes were disheveled, and he ran awkwardly.

Mikki witnessed but could not overhear the solemn, earnest conversation between priest and centurion. All around Mikki the worshippers wore glazed and terrified expressions, like a flock of sheep surrounded by wolves.

A beefy, florid-faced man shoved Mikki down. The boy twisted to the side as he stumbled and cried out as he fell. His strangled call for help was lost as he struggled to protect his head. He could not breathe. Trying to scratch his way out of the melee, he began to take others down as well.

"Mikki!" someone above and behind called to him. "Mikki!"

"Here!" He raised his hand.

Suddenly Linus appeared, fighting to reach him, to rescue him, to pull him up from drowning in a sea of sweaty tunics and frantic bodies.

Mikki felt someone grasp his hair and drag him up, up and out to open air. He gasped as Linus' grim and determined face appeared. The older brother managed to look both angry and relieved at the same moment. "Stay close to me," Linus urged, setting him on his feet and breaking a path to safety beside a pillar.

Linus put himself in front of Mikki with the marble pillar at his back. "Get up there." He instructed Mikki to climb the base of the column where he had a clear view.

Mikki reported that a temporary resolution of the conflict was reached. As Lord Caiaphas looked on, the Roman centurion ordered his troops withdrawn to the gates of the Temple complex.

Commands were shouted by Temple officials: “Worship will continue, but worshippers are not permitted near the Antonia. Only groups numbering ten or less may congregate.”

Crisis averted for the moment, the panic was quelled, and the crowds drifted apart. There was still a great amount of angry muttering, but no one had been killed; no massacre had occurred.

With a growl Linus rounded on Mikki, seizing him by the scruff of his neck and pulling him down from the pillar. “Are you trying to get killed?” Linus worried aloud. “Keep to business and leave politics alone! Isn’t that what Father always says? You can be so much trouble, Mikki!” Then he walked Mikki back to their stall with his arm around Mikki’s shoulders.

Tycho had also been searching for Mikki. He returned from the Temple Mount, grabbed his younger son and embraced him, but was unable to speak. Finding his voice, he stammered, “Linus, close . . . close the shop early. Things . . . are still too tense.”

Eli gave a feeble wave of relief but remained seated. Mikki thumped his chest and inhaled deeply. For the first time he understood what it must be like for Eli to feel he was drowning on dry land.

Tycho closed his eyes, as if trying to erase the nightmare image of what could have happened to Mikki. He gulped. “Scared pilgrims don’t buy shoes. But scared shoemakers can still make shoes . . . at home. Let’s go there and open again tomorrow.” He placed his forehead against Mikki’s. “Mikki, please . . . never again! You boys are all that matters.” And then to Eli, “Your parents will be worried. Come on, boys. Home.”



Fearful words darted about like swallows in the Shoemaker’s home.

“The Romans,” Mikki’s mother, Callisto, blurted. “That new governor, Pilate. Currying favor with the emperor. Doesn’t care about our ways, our laws, our lives.” Her eyes brimmed with what-ifs. “Mikki could have been killed!”

Tycho rubbed her hand in a calming gesture. “But he wasn’t. We’re all safe. No one got hurt.”

“And little Eli. What if he . . . ? His mother was frantic.”

Mikki frowned. “He was safe. I wouldn’t—”

Linus confirmed, “Eli was safe, Mother.”

Callisto fumed, “And what about tomorrow? What then?”

The Shoemaker shook his head. Mikki saw the lines on his father’s forehead deepen.

“We can stay closed tomorrow, too.” Tycho’s words trailed away. He and his wife exchanged a look Mikki could not interpret.

“When word of this spreads, the pilgrims will turn back,” Callisto said. “The crowds . . . a lot smaller?”

“It’s evil,” Mikki asserted, feeling again the wave of indignation he suffered when he saw the emperor’s face staring down at the Temple. “Mocking our worship!”

His father turned and made a shushing motion with his hands. “You mustn’t talk like that, do you hear? It’s dangerous. This may not be over yet. Be glad your sisters and their families don’t live here. There could be riots . . . crucifixions.”

Callisto blanched and sat down abruptly.

“Listen,” Tycho added, motioning for the others to sit. “So, it’s a hard time to live in Yerushalayim—anywhere in Judea, in fact. The new governor has to prove himself. Can’t allow rebellion. That motive beats all else. You know that prophet out in the desert, Yochanan the Baptizer? Openly challenging Herod Antipas and his queen. He’ll be dead before a year is past. No doubt Antipas has spies watching him now. The high priest’s men listen for sedition, too. Carry tales to the Romans. The way to get through this is to keep our heads down, stick to our last, eh? Stick to business and—”

“Stay out of politics,” Mikki chorused. “But, Father, blasphemy?”

“Better a live dog than a dead lion, eh? If a thousand Jews attack the Antonia to make Pilate take down the images, there’ll be a thousand fewer Jews living in the Holy City, and the images will still be up there. Now’s the time to keep our opinions to ourselves. To ourselves,” he emphasized.

Mikki nodded but despised his father’s fear.

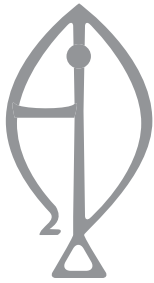
The image of Eli gasping for breath came to his mind. Every Jew living under the tyranny of Rome was drowning in fear, gasping to draw one breath of freedom.



The leaves of the tree were for the
healing of the nations.

No longer will there be anything
accursed. . . .

REVELATION 22:2-3



Digging Deeper into ELEVENTH GUEST

Dear Reader,

Have you struggled to hang on to hope, when everything seems hopeless? Do you wonder if God sees your suffering, the worries that keep you up at night? Have you experienced a rift in a relationship that needs mending, but you don't know how to go about it?

The journey of the lepers of Mak'ob is all about these questions, and so many more that might be your questions or situations too.

Did Mikki deserve such a dread disease, just when his life was beginning? Was it right that the Shoemaker—a very honest, upright man—had to struggle to keep his business afloat in a tough economy. Isn't God supposed to watch over the righteous?

Judah the Fisherman was a businessman who kept both profits and people in perspective. Yet his biggest battle of all was at home, with a shrewish wife.

The Cabbage Sisters, in their immaturity, fought over a what-if situation (the shared love of a young man) . . . until the reality of Tabitha's illness pulled them together and helped them realize what was truly important.

The brothers Obed and Jesse took very different paths in life. Jesse chose to flee home and his mother's domination. Obed chose to stay home and endure his mother's

abuse. Yet it was their shared love and Obed's forgiveness that brought Jesse, the wanderer, home again.

Do any of these situations hit home for you? Do you long for answers? acceptance? love? hope?

Following are six studies. You may wish to delve into them on your own or share them with a friend or a discussion group. They are designed to take you deeper into the answers to questions such as:

- Are some people just “destined” to suffer?
- Why doesn't God answer my prayers? And how can I deal with the what-ifs that haunt me?
- How can I make the best of an unhappy home situation?
- How can I know what's really important in life?
- Is God really watching? Does He care about what's broken in my life?
- How can I hang on to hope, even in the midst of difficult circumstances?

Can lives, bodies, and hearts truly be transformed? With Yeshua, *anything* is possible! Through *Eleventh Guest*, may the promised Messiah come alive to you . . . in more brilliance than ever before.

I | THAT'S ANOTHER STORY?!

They were meant to be a minyan of ten, chosen by lot to go out in search of Yeshua the Miracle Worker. The Galilean Rabbi was said to be able to heal every disease.

—P. 3

If you heard that a “miracle worker” was walking this earth, would you believe the stories? Why or why not?

What proof would make you believe in the claims of that miracle worker?

The Valley of Mak’ob was also known as the Valley of Suffering—and with good reason. Once a person with leprosy entered the Valley, the only way to leave was through death. It was dangerous to go Outside, for those with leprosy were greatly feared. No one else wanted to risk coming in contact with the “walking dead” for fear of contracting the disease themselves.

Staying Inside the Valley was so much safer . . . but there was only one end result.

How do you respond when you see those who are considered “untouchables” today (whether through social, mental, or physical conditions)?

Have *you* ever felt “untouchable”? If so, when? How did people respond to you during that time of your life? How has that experience influenced the way you treat others who are suffering now?

READ

Carpenter explained to the rabbi, “With Cantor flown away? It’s like this, Rabbi. Those of us with a few years on us—mind you, not these four youths, but the rest of the party—we’re thinking maybe it’s a sign. Maybe we’re meant to stay Inside.”

Other voices broke in while the four teenaged lads scowled.

“Aye,” agreed Crusher.

“That’s it,” concurred the two Cabbage Sisters in unison. “Thinking it’s a sign we shouldn’t . . .”

Fisherman, who had grown content with a life without the uncertain sea, added, “Never was too keen on the idea of leaving the Valley.”

Carpenter added, “So, if Your Honor agrees with what we’re saying? Well, Rabbi, we’d rather just . . . you know.” . . .

Carpenter squirmed. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

The four young Torah scholars sat forward eagerly. Their leader, son of the Shoemaker who lay close to death, proclaimed, “But we’re still young.

Still strong! Ah, Rabbi! We've never been Outside since we were small. Since we entered. Let us go! We'll go." He included the other scholars with his sweeping gesture. "Let us go Outside on our own. If there's a Messiah, we'll find him."

Rabbi raised his hand for silence. "Fine lads, all of you. Cantor would be proud of your eagerness. You're sons of his brave heart, that's certain. But without a leader. Without Cantor or Carpenter . . ."

—PP. 3–4

ASK

If you were one of the minyan chosen to leave the Valley, what concerns would you have (whether you dared to voice them or not)?

Which one of these people or groups would closest express your feelings? Explain.

- Shoemaker's Son (Mikki) and the other young Torah scholars
- Fisherman
- Crusher
- Carpenter
- the Cabbage Sisters
- Rabbi Ahava

READ

“I didn’t want Cantor to leave the Valley. But it seems to me he wouldn’t have wanted the rest of you to give up the quest just because he’s not here to lead you. . . . And what if Messiah was just over the next hill? if hope was within reach? Just a mile away? Would you have turned back?”

Crusher studied the patch of sky as if he saw the future there. “Well now, that’s altogether another story.”

Lily held up her clawlike left hand. “And if you knew a touch or a word could restore this? And the One we’ve all been waiting for was close enough for you to shout to him? to grasp his knees and not let him go until . . . until . . . ?”

Carpenter, ashamed of his willingness to stay in a familiar place and die, relented. “If you put it that way, Lily, of course we’d go on.”

“Yes. Yes, Carpenter,” the young widow encouraged. “Cantor would expect it of you. Expect you all to be brave.”

—PP. 4–5

ASK

How did Lily’s words change the course of the journey for the entire group?

What individual has encouraged you—with a word or touch—when you weren’t sure if you could go on? How?

In what way(s) have you seen a single individual change the course of a family, an organization, or a nation—for the better? Tell the story.

READ

“I’ve lived too long in Mak’ob to tell a good true story with a happy ending. No. I’ve forgotten all such stories.”

—CARPENTER, P. 10

Carpenter scanned the switchback trail they had ascended with such hope so many months ago. He imagined what the night must have been like when Yeshua came and healed them all.

Fisherman completed his thought. “All of them.”

“But not us.” Shoemaker put his arm around Mikki.

—P. 217

ASK

Do you agree with Carpenter’s assessment that there’s no such thing as a true story with a happy ending? Why or why not?

When have you felt hopeless—or wondered if suffering is simply the lot dealt to you in life?

What has happened (if anything) to change your perspective?

READ

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for You are with me. . . .
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies. . . .
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
—PSALM 23:4-6*

ASK

In what way(s) does the ending of the minyan's story in *Eleventh Guest* give you hope and encouragement for your own story?

How can you share with others about your time in “the Valley” to encourage them in their suffering?

WONDER . . .

“The end is within reach. The goal is in sight. We will take hold of the Truth. It is finally attained. . . . The future is written in the Book, is it not? What was. What is. What will be.”

—EBEN GOLAH, PP. XVI –XVII

If you believe that everything written in the Book—God’s Word—is the truth, and that the end is in sight, how will that influence the way you live today?



Dear Reader,

You are so important to us. We have prayed for you as we wrote this book and also as we receive your letters and hear your soul cries. We hope that *Eleventh Guest* has encouraged you to go deeper. To get to know Yeshua better. To fill your soul hunger by examining Scripture's truths for yourself.

We are convinced that if you do so, you will find this promise true: "*If you seek Him, He will be found by you.*"

— 1 CHRONICLES 28:9

Bodie & Brock Thoene

Authors' Note

The following sources have been helpful in our research for this book:

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| ¹ Rev. 2:13 | ¹¹ Ps. 81:7 | ²¹ Isa. 64:1 |
| ² Isa. 59:17 | ¹² Ps. 81:8-9 | ²² Job 1:21 |
| ³ John 15:5 | ¹³ Ps. 81:13-14, 16 | ²³ Gen. 2:18 |
| ⁴ Dan. 7:13-14 | ¹⁴ Isa. 64:1 | ²⁴ See Luke 6:38 |
| ⁵ Rev. 1:10-13 | ¹⁵ Zech. 3:10 | ²⁵ Gen. 2:24 |
| ⁶ Rev. 22:13 | ¹⁶ Ps. 107:9 | ²⁶ Prov. 3:9-10 |
| ⁷ Rev. 1:8, 11 | ¹⁷ Deut. 5:9 | ²⁷ Prov. 3:3 |
| ⁸ John 2:16 | ¹⁸ Lev. 23:40 | ²⁸ Prov. 2:11 |
| ⁹ Ps. 81:1-2 | ¹⁹ Ps. 127:4-5 | ²⁹ John 21:25 |
| ¹⁰ Ps. 81:3 | ²⁰ See Josh. 6:26 | |

About the Authors

BODIE AND BROCK THOENE (pronounced *Tay-nee*) have written over 50 works of historical fiction. That these best sellers have sold more than 10 million copies and won eight ECPA Gold Medallion Awards affirms what millions of readers have already discovered—the Thoenes are not only master stylists but experts at capturing readers' minds and hearts.

In their timeless classic series about Israel (The Zion Chronicles, The Zion Covenant, and The Zion Legacy), the Thoenes' love for both story and research shines.

With *The Shiloh Legacy* and *Shiloh Autumn* (poignant portrayals of the American Depression), *The Galway Chronicles* (dramatic stories of the 1840s famine in Ireland), and the *Legends of the West* (gripping tales of adventure and danger in a land without law), the Thoenes have made their mark in modern history.

In the *A.D. Chronicles* they step seamlessly into the world of Jerusalem and Rome, in the days when Yeshua walked the earth and transformed lives with His touch.

Bodie began her writing career as a teen journalist for her local newspaper. Eventually her byline appeared in prestigious periodicals such as *U.S. News and World Report*, *The American West*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. She also worked for John Wayne's Batjac Productions (she's best known as author of *The Fall Guy*) and ABC Circle Films as a writer and researcher. John Wayne described her as "a writer with talent that

captures the people and the times!” She has degrees in journalism and communications.

Brock has often been described by Bodie as “an essential half of this writing team.” With degrees in both history and education, Brock has, in his role as researcher and story-line consultant, added the vital dimension of historical accuracy. Due to such careful research, the *Zion Covenant* and *Zion Chronicles* series are recognized by the American Library Association, as well as Zionist libraries around the world, as classic historical novels and are used to teach history in college classrooms.

Bodie and Brock have four grown children—Rachel, Jake, Luke, and Ellie—and seven grandchildren. Their children are carrying on the Thoene family talent as the next generation of writers, and Luke produces the Thoene audiobooks. Bodie and Brock divide their time between London and Nevada.

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