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Prologue

OLD CITY JERUSALEM, PASSOVER 2002

PASSOVER *seder* had ended. Moshe Sachar kissed his five eldest sons, their wives, and their children good night at the door of his Old City Jerusalem home.

The oldest son, Luke, embraced Moshe. Tears were in his eyes. “Papa. Papa. It just wasn’t the same without them tonight.”

Moshe patted Luke on the back. “Your mother and sister-in-law could see us all from heaven. Rachel’s proud of you boys. And her nineteen grandchildren. Nothing she loved more than being a *bubbe* to all these grandchildren, eh? God blessed us with fifty-three wonderful years. Could I ask for more?”

“It shouldn’t have ended the way it did.” Luke frowned.

“It didn’t end, Son. I see the faces of our grandchildren and it’s like your mother isn’t gone. I saw Rachel smile when little Leah smiled, nu? I saw Rachel’s eyes when Etta looked at me. And I heard Rachel speak when Danielle recited the blessing.”

“You sure you’ll be all right, Papa?” Luke seemed reluctant to leave.

Moshe gestured toward his youngest son, Shimon, who stood grim-faced with his arms crossed, in the doorway of the study. Moshe whispered, “Pray for your brother. He’s having a hard time, eh?”

Shimon, aged thirty-seven, had lost his wife in the same bombing that had killed Rachel. Moshe said in a cheerful voice, “Your brother will be good company.”

Alfie, the barrel-chested old gardener, raised his hand and stepped up to embrace Luke. “And me. Don’t forget me.”

“Sure. Always Alfie.” Luke returned the hug of the simpleminded caretaker who had lived with Moshe and the Sachar family for over fifty years.

Alfie assured Luke, “Don’t worry none about your papa and brother, eh? Don’t worry. I take good care of your papa and Shimon. I been taking care your papa since before you boys was born.”

Moshe added, “Me and Alfie and Shimon. Three bachelors. We’ll stay up all night with our pipes. Talk about old times. Talk politics and archaeology. What could be better to pass the time on Passover in Jerusalem? We’ll be fine. Your mother would approve. Now go on home, Luke. I’ll ring you tomorrow.”

“Shalom, Papa.” Then Luke raised his hand in farewell to his brother. “Shimon. Alfie. Shalom.” Luke touched his finger to the *mezuzah* on the doorpost, spoke the blessing of peace, and stepped out to join his family in the lane. It was a short walk home for them.

The door clicked shut. Moshe stood for a moment with his hand on the latch. The clock ticked in the foyer behind him. The house was quiet. Too quiet.

From behind Moshe, Shimon spoke. “You okay, Papa?”

“Sure,” Moshe replied. “You?”

“It’s been a long night,” Shimon said wearily.

“Yes.”

“I’ll make coffee and bring macaroons before we show him, eh, Moshe?” The old giant lumbered off toward the kitchen.

It was the first Passover Israeli archaeologist Moshe Sachar had spent without Rachel since their marriage in 1948. The vacant chairs of Rachel and thirty-two-year-old daughter-in-law Susan were stark reminders that fifty years had not strengthened the fragile existence of Israel. Nor had time altered the Muslim vow to finish what Hitler had begun with the extermination of Jews in Nazi Germany. Worldwide anti-Semitism was once again escalating to levels unmatched since the days when Hitler began his propaganda campaign against the Jews of

Europe. Through the worldwide media, evil was once again sinking its claws into the minds and cultures of the nations of the world.

Even in the American church many had begun to preach against the nation of Israel in blatant disregard of the eternal promises God gave to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Meanwhile, in Israel, life or death for a Jew was often a matter of missing a bus targeted by a terrorist bomber or simply walking out of a restaurant seconds before a terrorist walked in.

One year had passed since Moshe and Shimon had lost their wives together in the suicide bombing of an Old City café. Moshe's wife, Rachel, had lived through the Holocaust, the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, and each successive war against Israel in the fifty years that followed.

The mother of six strong sons in Israel and one adopted daughter in America, Rachel had often told Moshe that when the Lord called her home she would be ready for a rest after cooking so many holiday meals for such a family!

Rachel had died as she used her body to shield two small children from the blast that ripped through the restaurant.

Shimon's wife, Susan, was an American archaeology student who had met and married Shimon five years earlier. When the *intifada* had begun, her parents had begged her to return to America. Like the biblical heroine in the book of Ruth, Susan had chosen to remain with her new Israeli family. Shimon's people had become her people, she said, and she would not leave. Susan had been six months pregnant when a ball bearing from the bomb exploded through her eye and into her brain, killing her instantly. The baby, a boy, died within minutes inside her. Susan Sachar's life had only begun when a Hamas terrorist murdered her and Rachel and the baby and many others.

On CNN the murderer was called a political activist.

Yasser Arafat declared that the bombing was Israel's fault.

The Muslim mother of the bomber was interviewed with great sympathy, and she told how proud she was of her son. His picture was posted throughout the West Bank and Gaza as a hero and martyr for Islam. His family received a payment of ten thousand dollars from Iraq and five thousand indirectly from Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

No one asked what this loss of their wives and the unborn child meant to Shimon or to Moshe.

Shimon, a professor of antiquities at Hebrew University, was mired in despair and grief. Not a day had passed this last year in which he had not thought of Susan and the baby boy he might have had.

Tonight he sank into the leather wingback chair facing Moshe's desk. Pressing his fingertips together, he stared blankly at the row of ancient pottery above the bookshelf.

Moshe sat down opposite his son. He could hear the *clank* of dishes as Alfie cleaned the kitchen and prepared coffee.

"It's late." Shimon did not look into his father's eyes.

Shimon most resembles me, Moshe noted. Tall, lean, and tanned. Prominent nose, high cheekbones. Dark brown eyes, black curly hair with a touch of gray at the temples. Shimon had the look of his Sephardic ancestors. He had also followed in Moshe's footsteps and had taken up his father's professorship after Moshe retired.

"You are the most like me," Moshe said aloud. "Of all the boys."

Shimon inhaled deeply and turned away. "You and Mama. What, fifty-three years? I wanted it to be like that for me and Susan."

"I won't offer you platitudes, Shimon."

"Good. You know my friends are saying I should begin to date again?" He shifted his weight in the chair in disgust. "You know? Like getting a puppy when the old dog dies or something. Horrible. Horrible."

"Yes," Moshe agreed.

"Papa." Shimon rubbed his brow, as though trying to blot out an image in his brain. "I don't know what to do with myself. You know? I go home to our little flat. Still. You know? I expect Susan'll be there, waiting."

"Yes." Moshe remembered the countless occasions he had forgotten Rachel was gone. He had called out to her, expecting a reply.

"Papa? What can I do?"

"Work. Study."

Shimon shook his head. "I've lost interest in . . . everything. I don't know. I've been granted a sabbatical from the university. I'm not going back after spring break, Papa. I need time away. I . . . everything is dark. I feel blind. Blind without her light."

"You're not alone in your grief."

"Why is that fact no comfort? I keep asking myself, *why?* Why? You and I walked out of the café together. They stayed behind talking. Mama and Susan. I wish . . . you know—Well, you know what I wish."

“That you had lingered long enough to die with her.”

“Yes. Yes. That.”

“I know, Son. I know. It’s not so hard for me. I’m over eighty years old now. I’ll see your mother soon. Soon. But you have a long life ahead of you.”

“I suppose I’ll have to live it in this darkness.”

“No. But you’ll have to live till you see the light at the end.”

Silence. Shimon pressed his lips together.

Alfie entered, carrying a thermos and book bag slung over his shoulder. He stared at Shimon, then addressed Moshe. “You haven’t told him about it yet?”

“No,” Moshe replied.

“Well, you better tell him,” Alfie said slowly. “Your oldest son, Luke, knows. Shimon is the youngest. He should know too. It’s not safe only one son knowing the secret. What if something happens? You’re old. Me too.”

Shimon raised his head and fixed his gaze on Alfie. “What are you going on about, Alf?”

Alfie strode to the bookshelf. He narrowed his eyes and said firmly to Moshe, “He don’t know nothing about it, eh? Nothing about his great-grandfather, the rabbi, the way he knew all the paths under the city? Nothing about where you and me disappeared to in 1948 after the Old City fell to the Arabs? Nor what’s right under this house? Nothing at all? Shimon don’t know? Moshe! We’re getting old, you and me. And Rachel said a long time ago that Shimon had to know the secret. Had to know. He’s the youngest. Him and Luke need to both of them know. You showed Luke last year. You promised Rachel you’d tell the oldest and the youngest someday before you die.”

Shimon reacted with irritation. “What’s he talking about, Papa?”

Moshe responded cautiously, “You remind me of myself, Shimon. And so your mother said you were the most likely to succeed me.”

“And so I have done. I teach in your same classroom. I would have liked to emulate you in other ways. Your life. But that’s out of my hands,” Shimon countered.

“Tell him, Moshe,” Alfie urged. “I brought coffee. A thermos. We’ll take it. It’s Passover. Tell him.”

Moshe nodded stiffly. “In May 1948 I was commander of the defenders of the Old City. You know that much of the story.”

“Yes,” Shimon put in. “The Jewish Quarter was surrounded and besieged by five Arab armies. Only two hundred Jewish defenders against thousands. Fifteen hundred Jewish civilians were starving, without water, crammed into the basement of the Hurva Synagogue. And then you ran out of ammunition. You were overrun. Defeated by the Arabs. Taken prisoner of war by the Arabs. The Jewish civilian population was expelled from the Jewish Quarter. Mama was with them when they were driven out of Old City Jerusalem. Uncle Yacov too. Grandfather Shlomo Lebowitz died that same night. The synagogues were burned. For nineteen years Jordan controlled the Jewish Old City, and no Jew was allowed into Old City Jerusalem or allowed to worship at the Western Wall.”

Moshe raised his finger in correction. “Mostly true.”

“Tell him,” Alfie insisted.

“Yes.” Shimon leaned forward. “Tell me, Papa.”

Moshe cleared his throat. “You know this house is built on the very site where Grandfather Lebowitz’s house once stood.”

“Yes,” Shimon replied. “When Israel recaptured the Old City from Jordan in 1967, this property was returned to you and Mama. You rebuilt the house. You and Alfie rebuilt it with your own hands. Luke and Uncle Yacov helped. I remember.”

Moshe smiled enigmatically. “We didn’t want anyone else poking around here. Especially in the basement. So we rebuilt this house ourselves. We kept the secret.”

“What secret, Papa?”

“Before the Old City fell in 1948, Grandfather showed me a passage in the basement of this house.”

“Passage?”

“A tunnel. From ancient times,” Moshe continued. “It leads beneath the Old City and then under the Temple Mount itself. Alfie and I . . . as the Arab armies were entering the Jewish Quarter . . . Alfie and I escaped through a second passage from Eliyahu Synagogue into a chamber. A library.”

Shimon blinked dumbly at his father. “I heard the legends. Always. Who hasn’t? But what, Papa? Are you telling me these are not myths?”

“You’re my youngest son, Shimon. You, like me, will know what this treasure means. The secret was shown to me by your great-grandfather. Your uncle Yacov also knew of it. But he died without

children. So the ancient guardianship is passed through me to two of my sons. To Luke, who was born the day Alfie and I returned to the surface . . . and now also to you, my youngest.”

“Show him,” Alfie insisted, bolting the exterior door of the study. “I brought macaroons. Coffee too. Let’s show him.”

Moshe stood stiffly. “Yes. It’s time. I felt it tonight like I have never felt it before. The end of some things. The beginning of others. I’m not young anymore.”

Alfie leapt to his feet. “Please! Papa! Yes! Show me!”

“Alfie,” Moshe said, deferring to the old caretaker, “open it then.”

Alfie shifted the bag of macaroons on his shoulder and reached up to hook a gnarled index finger around the center stem of a seven-branched candlestick. With a slight pressure the menorah tilted forward with a click. One narrow section of the bookshelf slid back, revealing an opening wide enough for only one man to enter.

Shimon gasped. “Is this what you were doing all those times Mama said you were studying and couldn’t be disturbed?”

Moshe laughed. “She spoke the truth. You always assumed I worked in this room, eh?”

“Twenty-two steps here,” Alfie instructed. “We did it that way because it’s the Hebrew alphabet. Twenty-two letters. Moshe taught it to me so I could remember it.”

They entered the confined space. Shoulders brushed the walls as the three descended into darkness. Twenty-two steps beginning with *alef*.

Moshe pulled a handle at the bottom. The bookshelf slid closed behind them, bringing absolute blackness.

“Son, give me your hand.” Moshe grasped Shimon’s fingers. “You’ll learn to do this without light.” He pulled Shimon’s hand forward and brushed his fingertips across the cold stone wall. The raised image of a menorah was carved into the stone. “You feel it?”

“Yes. Yes!” Shimon said in awe.

“Then push each of the seven branches starting from right to left.”

Shimon obeyed. The wall groaned as it opened. The space was filled with a sound like a rushing wind and the sweet fragrance of incense.

“How will we move in the dark?” Shimon asked.

“Point your index finger upwards,” Moshe explained. “That’s right. Reach up to the top of the tunnel. You will feel three separate patterns of grooves in the stone. Fit your finger into the single-finger-

width slot. Yes. Yes. Like a trolley car, eh? Now hold on to the back of my jacket. Keep your finger pointing up, fixed into the groove. Alfie will put his hand on your shoulder. Come on then.”

The trio entered the low, constricted passageway and inched forward, following the same path by which the ancient high priest of Solomon’s day had once entered the Temple.

For the sake of Shimon, Moshe repeated the instructions that old Rabbi Lebowitz had given him over fifty years earlier. “One finger into the groove. This will guide you along the one path you must take to the chamber of scrolls. Take no other path, or you will surely find death.”

They did not speak further as they progressed through the darkness. Moshe remembered clearly what the old rabbi had told him about Alfie Halder: *“Alfie is one of the Thirty-Six Righteous. For the sake of such innocent hearts, the Lord is merciful and the judgment of the Almighty against the earth is held back until the day Messiah will come.”*

Strange after fifty years how the words of the old man replayed in Moshe’s mind as if they had been spoken yesterday. During his time beneath the Temple Mount, Moshe had found the company of Alfie a comfort. Together the two had kept their guardianship a secret. Alfie had accepted the burden of their responsibility with childlike peace, seemingly undaunted by the prospect that they might have spent a lifetime beneath the mountain. Each time the two had made the journey of return into the chamber, Alfie had entered with the joy of praise on his lips.

“Tonight,” old Alfie said softly, *“I’d rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.”* And then he laughed. “A long time we two been doorkeepers, eh, Moshe? Fifty years and better, eh? Ah, well. Time to pass it on. Almost home. We’re almost home, Moshe!”

Sometimes curving, sometimes straight, the stone path beneath their feet was worn smooth from centuries of guardians.

When the guiding groove on the ceiling came to an abrupt end, Moshe, with a practiced hand, found the low stone arch of the entrance. “From here we kneel to pass through,” he instructed his son.

“We’re pilgrims,” Alfie explained as he dropped to his knees.

Moshe prayed the Shema: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord . . .”²

Alfie and Shimon repeated the familiar words. Then Alfie said to Shimon, “They’ve been waiting for you a long time, Shimon.”

“Papa?” Shimon whispered in awe. “Who’s been waiting?”

Moshe did not reply. He slid his finger over the cool facade, found an indentation in the stone, and pushed inward. With a *whoosh*, the wall groaned and yielded to his touch. The distant sound of music echoed on the rush of wind that blew past them.

“Come forward, Son,” Moshe instructed Shimon. As they entered, the sense of vast space opened up before Shimon. He remained on his knees, shoulder-to-shoulder with Alfie and Moshe. The door slid shut behind them.

“Now,” Moshe said. “Look up.”

Shimon looked up and gasped. There was light enough to see the face of his father and Alfie clearly. Above them was a perfect replica of the skies above Jerusalem. Luminescent stars, re-created with incredible accuracy, showed the heavens of early summer. There was the North Star, fixed like a diamond in the handle of the Little Dipper.

“There, Shimon,” Moshe said. “The polestar by which travelers find their way. So even here, beneath the Temple Mount, you’ll always know which direction is north. You can’t be lost here. Those who came before us made sure of that. And it’s precise in every detail. It’s a gift, Shimon.”

“A miracle,” Alfie said.

“Yes,” Shimon agreed. “A miracle, Papa! I remember summer nights when we all slept on the housetop and you taught us the names of the stars.”

“And here they are. Old friends, these stars.” Moshe was pleased. “The shepherd-king David knew them well by name. Can you name them, Shimon?”

“The summer triangle of Deneb, Altair, and Vega in the east,” Shimon replied. “Antares in the south. Regulus there in the paw of Leo in the west. And Arcturus directly overhead.”

Woven into the artificial night were the Hebrew letters proclaiming, *In the beginning Elobim created the heavens and the earth.*³ With a fine golden thread, the names of God were inscribed among the stars: *Adonai. Elobim. El Shaddai. YHWH. King of kings. Lord of lords. Wonderful Counselor. Savior.*

The glory of the heavens provided light enough to read by. “Stand up, my son,” Moshe instructed. “Stand and be strong. This is your heritage. The Year of the Lord. *Anno Domini*. Come with us.”

Moshe led them through a west-facing entrance to a balcony that overlooked an enormous vaulted library with shelves stacked with row upon row of clay jars. In the center of the hall were three long study tables, additional jars, and a box with flashlights and a supply of batteries.

“Papa?” Shimon questioned. “Tell me.”

“The Temple library,” Moshe replied. “Seven thousand scrolls remain of the original fifty thousand. Most of these were hidden when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Temple burned. There’s one chamber where books penned by eyewitnesses have been added from time to time. And that’s where you’ll begin your journey. *The A.D. Chronicles*, that section’s called. It’s where I began when I was a little younger than you are now. There are twelve doors, each leading to another room. Many choices. But after Susan and your mother died, Alfie and I discussed it. There, that center doorway. Carved in the capstone you see the words *The A.D. Chronicles*.” Moshe inclined his head. “I’ve made a list of the order of reading. Seventy scrolls in all. It’ll take you several years. The house will be yours and Luke’s, so you can come and go as you like.”

Moshe led his son down a spiral staircase to the floor of the library. He swept his hand upward to where the words of three languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Latin—ringed the parapet.

WHAT WAS—WHAT IS—WHAT WILL BE

“It’s all here.” Moshe took Shimon’s hand. “Enough for one man to study for several lifetimes and still not understand the height, the depth, the breadth of God’s love for mankind. I’ve been studying for fifty years and yet haven’t made a dent.”

“Papa?” Shimon croaked. “I’ve only been granted a one-year sabbatical!”

Alfie laughed. “Ah, you’ll have fun, Shimon! Your mama always said of all the boys you would be the one who would not want to stop reading, eh?”

“Yes. Under the covers with a flashlight,” Shimon remarked. “She never could make me quit once I had a good book in my hands.”

“That was practice,” Alfie said.

Moshe led the way to a study table, where several clay jars were lined up beside a lamp. “I’ve laid these out for you. Here are the first three Jerusalem scrolls Alfie and I studied. But there, you see this one? I’ve chosen this fourth scroll for you to begin your studies. I call it *First Light*.” He tapped his fingers affectionately against the pottery. “Here,

Shimon. Inside is light to help guide you through this darkest night of your soul. Yes. Begin here.” Moshe pushed the container toward Shimon. “You see what words are pressed into the clay? Read.”

Shimon traced the raised Hebrew letters on the rim of the jar with his fingertips. “*My name is Peniel.*”

“Yes. His name was Peniel,” Moshe whispered affectionately, as if the one who wrote the script was an old friend. “Peniel. ‘Face of God.’ That’s it, Shimon, my boy. *First Light*. Go on. Open it. He’s been waiting to speak to you about darkness and light for a very long time. He taught me things I didn’t understand until I read his story.”

Shimon detached the seal that covered the mouth of the jar. At his father’s urging, he removed the scroll. Lambskin. Supple. Almost like new. Shimon sank down to sit on the bench at the study table.

“Now, Shimon,” old Alfie instructed, “we’ll stay with you tonight, your papa and me. I always liked Peniel. So. We’re running out of time, us old men. Almost home. Almost home. Read to us, Shimon.”

Shimon unrolled the first sheaf. A flower was pressed on the page. A gardenia? Shimon could not be certain. He scanned the distinct Hebrew letters of the document:

“Those who lived in darkness have seen a great light. . . .

Look at Him. Yes. Look! The ordinariness of it. That’s the most extraordinary thing!

He came to us like the great treasure of a king, beyond value, hidden in straw, packed into a common clay jug, shipped to earth among the cargo of a river scow.

Yes, it was something like that when He came. No one really knew. Not really.

Yes, look at Him. Ordinary.

His name? Yeshua. It means ‘God is Salvation.’

Thirty-two years old by human reckoning. Just under six feet tall. Sun-bronzed. Slim and strong. Square hands. Calloused hands. Skinned knuckles from pulling up the bucket of a stone well. Brown eyes. Dark brown with gold flecks. Matching brown, curly hair, sun-streaked with hints of copper; tied back and braided at the nape of His neck. Beard thick and dark.

He stroked His beard and smiled often when He considered a question that interested Him or heard a song that pleased

Him. Or when He held a child in His arms and asked, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ Or more to the point, ‘I like you exactly the way you are.’

He was nothing remarkable at first glance. Could blend into a crowd and never be noticed until His eyes locked on you and compassion poured into your soul.

And yet. What is the truth here?

Yeshua.

First Light.

The great red dawning that rises over the mountains of all eternity. The shining bridge of stars that arches up and up and gives us a path from earth into heaven’s throne room.

Yeshua: the early cock crow that will wake us from death, after the final night of time has fled.

To our ship, battered by the gale, He is the lighthouse.

To those who wait on shore and search the seas for a sail, He is the ship that safely carries Himself and those, our dear ones, His children, who have left us behind.

He brings the message of eternity to us across the vast gulf of all time.

He is the well of our hope, the bright epitome of all things. The mystery that, even now, is only dimly understood by the human heart.

And yet, listen! Listen! Here is the remarkable thing about it! It seemed so ordinary.

It was a time of sadness, as life has always been. Frightening to those who lived through the darkness of political upheaval, corruption, violence, cruelty, futility, and the manipulation of men’s minds. It was a time of striving and longing and smashed hopes . . . and nothing ever, ever, ever turning out the way anyone wished it would!

Like always, eh? So much like every day since the beginning of time that who could notice someone extraordinary had come among us?

The innocent died while evil men thrived. Mothers and fathers stood at the edge of their children’s graves and shook their fists at God and cried out, ‘Why?’

Why?

At first only a few noticed when He came among us, bringing answers.

Then as His light illuminated the darkness and threatened to expose evil,

As He challenged self-righteous hypocrisy,
Embraced the lonely, gave hope to the hopeless,
Then they noticed.

Yes.

Only then.

When it looked as though everything might change, they noticed.

Only then those men of darkness, who liked to keep things the way they had always been, looked for a way to kill Him.

Yeshua.

This is a story of many ordinary people. Some had met Him early and were already changed. But there were others, so many, who still lived in darkness. Waiting. Hoping for something or someone to come along and heal the wounds of body and soul.

That year at Passover there was a whisper. Maybe. Maybe now our Deliverer will come! Tens of thousands crowded into Jerusalem to look for Him. But He did not come.

That year, instead of the Messiah, counterfeit champions under the command of the rebel bar Abba pulled their swords and did battle at the Temple against Rome and the forces of the hated Herod Antipas!

They could not win.

In this brief Passover skirmish the Jewish Zealots, seeking freedom from bondage, took many innocent pilgrims with them to the grave.

And anguished cries filled the streets that night. Why? Why? Where was God in all this? And where was Messiah? Why did He not intervene? No one knew. No one except three small boys and an old shepherd named Zadok.”

And as Shimon read, the scent of a garden and the hushed whisper of the wind swirled around them. . . .

I

CHAPTER

In a tiny, unpretentious house in the village known as Beth-lehem, “House of Bread,” bunches of lavender dried in the rafters of the main room, filling the place with sweet aroma. The seder supper was finished. The stories of Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt had all been sung. The clutter of empty dishes remained stacked on the table.

Three boys and a sheepdog shared a bed made of soft fleece. Avel, aged nine, lay between five-year-old Emet and eleven-year-old Ha-or Tov.

Emet and Ha-or Tov were drowsy, nearly asleep. Avel, eyes heavy, listened to the soft voices of two men engaged in conversation. Red Dog blinked at the firelight.

Zadok, Chief Shepherd of the flocks and herds of Israel, was old. A patch covered one eye. Skin was like leather, face split by the scar of an ancient wound. His voice and that of his Passover guest, Yeshua of Nazareth, drifted into the bedchamber.

“But if not now, when?” Zadok inquired of Yeshua.

Avel strained to hear Yeshua’s reply.

When?

In the history of the world, had there ever been a more important question? So many things depended on the answer. Redemption. Freedom. Vengeance against Roman oppressors and corrupt religious rulers.

Avel rested his cheek on his hand. Zadok was not asking one question, but many.

When?

When would Yeshua openly declare His right to the throne of David?

When would He take His place at the head of an army to drive the Romans from Jerusalem and Israel?

When would He avenge the blood of those who had fallen victim to Roman swords within the Temple courts only today in Jerusalem?

“If not now, Lord, when?”

And who had more right to know than Zadok? Zadok, who as a young man had been among the first shepherds to see the angels and hear their heavenly proclamation that the Messiah had been born in a lambing barn at Beth-lehem.

Zadok, who had brought first word of the miraculous event to the elders of the Temple as he delivered the young lambs of Beth-lehem and Migdal Eder for the daily sacrifice.

Zadok, who had made room in his own home for the young mother, her husband, and the newborn baby king.

Zadok, who had secretly sent the family on their way to safety as the soldiers of the old butcher king, Herod, had come by night to kill every male child under the age of two in the village.

Zadok, whose face had been ripped open by a Roman gladius in his battle to save his children.

Zadok, who had buried three tiny boys while the keening of his wife, Rachel, echoed across the pastures of Migdal Eder to be heard as far away as Ramah.

Zadok, who had kept his holy vow of silence about the whereabouts of the promised King of Israel for thirty-two years until tonight.

Did a man who suffered so much not deserve to know why? What had it all been for?

When?

Yeshua, His gaze fixed intently on the old man, did not answer at first. Then He grasped Zadok's hand. “You were the first to hear. The

first to believe. The first to suffer loss for my sake. Your babies are the first martyrs. Surely you've known, old friend, that it was no accident that the Son of David was born in a stable among the lambs set apart for sacrifice in the Temple of Yerushalayim. That same child born thirty-two years ago in Beth-lehem is *korban*, that which is holy and set apart for the purposes of the heavenly Father."

"But what can it mean?" Zadok's voice was intense.

"Zadok? You're Chief Shepherd of the Temple flock. You tend the lambs for sacrifice. Can it be that you've forgotten the words spoken by the prophet Isaias about the Messiah?"

Zadok waved a hand. Evidently, Avel thought, the old man did not want to be reminded of that part of the Scripture. "So much written about what is *korban*. How can an old man be expected to remember it all?"

Yeshua stroked His beard. Without taking His eyes from the shepherd He said, "*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led as a lamb to slaughter.*"⁴

That was all. As if it explained anything!

Ha-or Tov, now wide awake, whispered to Avel, "What does Yeshua mean? What do the sacrificial lambs raised here in the fields of Beth-lehem have to do with Messiah, the Redeemer?"

"I think he's talking about the riots today," Avel replied.

"The penalty for breaking the commands of the Almighty," Yeshua continued, "is death. That curse now rests on every human soul. Redemption costs something, Zadok, my old friend. It is written by Isaias about the Son of Man, '*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. . . . He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. . . . the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*'"⁵

Zadok leaned close. Firelight glowed golden on his face. "Can the cost of our salvation be so high?"

"Tomorrow I'll be teaching in Beth-Anyah."

"So close to Yerushalayim! You'll draw the wolves out along with the sheep. You put yourself at their mercy."

"A day is coming when they will understand God's Mercy."

"But not that way, Lord! Tell me it won't be!"

"God's love for each person is that profound."

"There must be another way! Crush our enemies! Call down fire

from heaven! Destroy the wicked! Set up a kingdom in Yerushalayim like our shepherd-king, David! Like you, he was born here in Beth-lehem!”

“Zadok, when the soldiers of Herod came to Beth-lehem to kill every baby boy, you sought to save your three sons.” Yeshua touched the scar on Zadok’s cheek. Avel fixed his eyes on the scene, remembering his own healing. But this time Yeshua did not make the jagged line smooth again or restore the eye lost in the battle, though Avel knew He could have done so. “This scar is proof of your love for your children.”

“I failed. I am alive and my babies are in their graves.”

“Not for want of effort. You would have died to save your little ones. I know you. Even now you’d face a lion and lay down your life to save your flocks. Can the Son sent by the Father do any less for the flock given to him? Would you deny the Lord the honor of wounds and scars that will be eternal proof of how much he loves you?”

“I will die for you, Lord.”

*“He was led like a lamb to slaughter.”*⁶

“But I am more ready to give up my own life! Gladly!”

“One day it may be so. Anyone who lays down his life for my sake will find it.⁷ God so loved the world that whoever believes in his Son will never die but will inherit eternal life.⁸ But first, the good shepherd will lay down his life to save his flock. That price must be paid to redeem those the Father has given to me. The prophecy of what will happen is all there, recorded by Moses and the prophets. They longed to see what you see, to hear what you have heard.⁹ The battle for mankind will be won.”

“Rabbi, will we fight the enemy then? Together?”

“Don’t misunderstand, old friend . . . *by his wounds we are healed.*”¹⁰

The prophecy hung like the scent of lavender on the air. Then, inexplicably, Avel saw a tangible sorrow grip the old man, as if he remembered something. What was the meaning of it? Avel wondered. What had that fragment of verse awakened in the old man’s understanding?

Shoulders sagged. With a groan Zadok bowed his head. Ran crooked fingers through his thatch of white hair. What did Zadok hear that Avel did not?

After a long time the aged shepherd pleaded, “Ah! No! And after such a fine beginning. I looked up! Saw the stars shinin’ there above us

in the field. Such joy we felt. What a beautiful baby boy! Such hope! What's it for? It can't be meant to end so ill!"

Silence descended. Then, finally, Yeshua replied, "It can't be any other way."

"But when?"

"Next year in Yerushalayim. Passover."

"I won't attend." Zadok raised his chin defiantly. But Avel knew the truth of it: Yes, Zadok would be there.

Yeshua stood and smiled. "Never mind, old friend. I'll see you again. Soon." He glanced at Red Dog. "The faithful ones are gone. Wolves lead the flock of Israel. They won't let you rest."

Zadok's lower lip shot out. "Get yourself out of Judea! Y' know what they'll do! The office of high priest is bought and paid for. They fear you. And after today? What happened in the Temple? They'll find some way to blame you for it."

"It isn't yet my time."

"Y' must leave! Thirty years ago I warned your mother and Joseph to leave. Go to Egypt. To Alexandria. There are true Israelites in Alexandria. They have a temple there where some might listen. Them that hold the power in Yerushalayim now will use their might against you as Herod, the great butcher, once tried. Caiaphas as high priest is in league with the Romans. Up to the neck. Herod Antipas depends on Roman soldiers to keep the people from revolution and the Nabatean king from attacking. It's a dangerous time for us all."

"Men's souls have a fiercer enemy than Rome. More terrible than Herod Antipas. Don't be afraid of those who have power to kill the body. Beware of one who will destroy your soul if he can." Yeshua glanced toward Avel, Emet, and Ha-or Tov. "Follow the shepherd," he said to the boys. "Learn from him. Listen to no other voice and you will live!" Then He placed His hand on Zadok's shoulder in farewell. "Teach them Torah as the Lord commands a father to teach his children. Zadok! Take care of my lambs!"

Zadok nodded, unable to speak.

The two clasped hands. "I'll see you soon. Won't I?" A flash of understanding appeared to pass between them.

Avel fought the urge to run to Yeshua, to wrap his arms around Him and beg Him not to leave them unprotected.

Yeshua touched His finger to the mezuzah, the small rectangular

case containing a fragment of Scripture. This was the covenant-mark placed on the doorpost of every Jewish house in remembrance of the blood of the Passover lamb.

In a gentle voice Yeshua whispered the blessing: *“The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.”*¹¹

Yeshua’s benediction seemed a promise that the Lord Himself would watch over them, Avel thought. Why then was Avel afraid to see Him go? Even with hope that the Lord would preserve them, death felt very close. Wolves were stalking the flock, nipping at the heels of the Good Shepherd and all who followed Him.

The two men embraced. Without a backward glance, Yeshua strode into the night.