

Under a Violet Sky

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Chapter One

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A light snow had fallen as the black, bullet-proof Mercedes carrying Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler left the autobahn, which flowed out of Bavaria into Austria. The car followed a country road for a kilometre and stopped. The driver rolled down his window and instructed two guards, in winter overcoats, to open a wire mesh gate with barbed wire on top. The gate was the only break in a fence that stretched into the distance on either side.

After a kilometre and a half of treacherous driving along a narrow road with snow-covered trees on either side they arrived at a checkpoint. Three guards, also dressed in winter overcoats, stood behind a yellow barrier which straddled the road. They froze to attention when they realised who was in the car. A Sergeant left the green wooden guard's hut and marched to the waiting vehicle.

"Heil, mein Fuhrer!" He barked, while saluting, after looking in the car.

He signalled the guards to raise the barrier.

As the Mercedes drove past the saluting guards Hitler turned to Himmler and said: "I hope the money is being spent well here Heinrich."

"Ja mein Fuhrer," replied the small, bespectacled man, as he shifted uncomfortably on the seat.

They drove past green military trucks, which had black crosses with white outlines on the doors, and turned sharp right toward a cliff face, blasted out of the side of a mountain. The Mercedes pulled up in front of two green metal doors where two men in white lab coats waited. The driver jumped out and opened the rear door to allow the two Nazi leaders out.

"This is Doctor Teubert mein Fuhrer," said Himmler as he stepped forward to introduce a tall, thin man with brown, wavy hair, "he is Director Heisenberg's colleague."

"Heil, mein Fuhrer!" Teubert said with a salute.

"Ah Doctor," said Hitler. "What have you got here to show me?"

"Mein Fuhrer, as you know, we are building an underground laboratory and research area to aid in the development of the atomic bomb for the Third Reich."

"Yes Herr Doctor."

A guard pulled open one door, and the group of men walked into the interior of the mountain. The gaping mouth of a large metal tube greeted them to their left and ran into the distant darkness. There were cables and wooden crates lying everywhere. Men in dark blue overalls were rotating spanners and turning screwdrivers.

"Mein Fuhrer, this will be Wehrmacht Two the most powerful cyclotron in the world. Thanks to the funding you have given us for equipment like this we hope to be well ahead of the Americans in uranium enrichment. But, this is not what I have asked you here to witness. If you would follow me please?"

They walked further into the mountain and entered a darkened area.

"Karl, the lights please?" Teubert said to a plump man in a lab coat with short, fair hair and circular spectacles, who stood in semi-darkness by a far wall.

Suddenly a large area flooded with white light.

"Incredible!" exclaimed Hitler, for in front of him was a sleek, black bell-shaped object five metres in diameter and four metres in height. A section of the upper surface was missing, and cables ran into the interior.

“What is it?”

“Mein Fuhrer, this craft is from another world, possibly from another galaxy. We call it ‘The Bell’.”

“How did you come by it?”

“Shipped here from Poland!”

“Mein Fuhrer,” interrupted Himmler. “I was responsible for having the object brought here. The SS realised its potential when discovered in Poland, and after some initial work in the mine found in, we thought it safer to bring such an important find back to the Fatherland. I telephoned Doctor Teubert, and he suggested bringing it here where he would investigate when he was held up with his own work.”

“I see,” said Hitler walking toward the ship. “So Herr Doctor, what have you discovered - an atomic generator?”

“No mein Fuhrer this craft flew by polarizing anti-gravity action generated from an internal machine. The ship pulls the destination toward it when the machine is switched on and then when the machine is switched off, flies at the speed of light to that position.”

“And you have done this Herr Doctor?”

“Well no, because we do not know how to set the machine for spatial flight, but we have had success with inter-dimensional settings; you see, mein Fuhrer, this ship flies not only fly through space but also through dimensions. I can pull up a dimension and hold it by reducing the power rather than cutting it all together.”

Teubert turned to a youth in a lab coat. “Günter, the goggles please?”

The young assistant handed out pairs of shaded goggles.

“If you would put these on gentlemen; there may be bright flashes,” said Teubert.

Hitler and Himmler took off their caps and pulled the goggles over their heads. Teubert then signalled to his assistant, who then pulled a lever next to the light switches on the cavern wall. A loud hum then filled the air.

“An extra precaution gentleman: a force field around the ship—another toy The Bell has given us!” Teubert said, as he walked back and stood beside Hitler and Himmler. He then picked up a control with a cable, which ran into the ship. He flicked two switches and two electric motors burst into life and joined the cacophony that filled the cavern.

“We have to use our electric motors because we don’t know what the ship, and consequentially the anti-gravity machine, was powered by. The source might have been damaged before the ship was found,” the doctor said, before he turned a knob and the motors howled. As he did so the atmosphere around the black craft crackled with static electricity.

Suddenly there was a flash of light and a sound like the crack of a whip, and standing gaping at the group of men beside The Bell was the dark figure of a woman with a face of wrinkled light, grey skin and total black eyes. Her dark ragged clothes hung from her two metre tall frame. Lifeless, fair hair lay flat on the top of her skull and fell down the sides of her head onto her shoulders.

She opened a distorted mouth to show a set of sharp, pointed teeth. Then, she leapt toward the men, but was restrained by the electromagnetic field. Hitler and Himmler jumped back as the electromagnets screamed with the extra strain placed on them and Günter, the youthful assistant, ran off into the darkness.

The demon closed her eyes and cackled. Then in a deep unworldly voice, she said: “You’re all going to die, and I will come for you!” Then she cackled again as she rose into the air.

Teubert, fearing that the electromagnets would not take another assault on the field, reduced the power of the motors and the figure disappeared with another sound like the crack of a whip.

Hitler removed his goggles and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "That, I have to say Herr Doctor, was interesting. How do you stop the ship from disappearing into the dimension?"

"By keeping on the power supply to the anti-gravity machine and then reducing it gradually when we want to end contact." Teubert said as he placed the control back on the floor. He then instructed Karl to stop the electromagnets.

"Mein Fuhrer, do I keep up the investigation on the ship?"

"Yes, by all means, and Herr Doctor, not a word of what happened here today must escape this work place."

"Ja mein Fuhrer."

Hitler turned to Himmler as the black Mercedes sped towards Munich, and said: "Heinrich, I want you to close the work under the mountain. I don't want word getting out we, the head men of the Third Reich, were frightened by some vision from another dimension." He then gazed at the passing fields. "Do you understand what I'm saying? That ship's not to see the light of day again!"

"But, mein Fuhrer..."

"Heinrich," interrupted Hitler. "Pass it around that we found them working too slowly. It will serve as a warning to Heisenberg or anyone else of what could happen to them if they do not get on with developing the atomic bomb for us; it will cause a somewhat 'uncertainty principle' if you like. The work in Poland might continue faster."

"Ja mein Fuhrer," said Himmler as he watched a rare trace of a smile pass over his leaders face.

Later that day as the light faded two covered jeeps with black crosses on the doors pulled up at the check point in front of the mountain laboratory.

"Sergeant!" shouted a man clad in white winter gear.

"Yes Captain?" answered the Sergeant, as both men saluted.

"Are the scientists inside the cavern?"

"Yes sir, they are hard at work."

"And the army engineers?"

"They are on a break in the cabin."

"You, your men, and the engineers are to report to the base in Rosenheim."

The two jeeps then drove to within two hundred metres of the cliff face and the men jumped out. Two of the commandos climbed above the half-closed green doors and set charges in several crevices, then threw the jointed cable down to one side. Another two climbed up a footpath one hundred metres from the doors and rolled heavy boulders over the escape hatch making sure one jammed the handle.

The captain pulled both doors shut and chained them. He then cut the electric and telephone cables, before picking up the charges cable. He laid it out as he walked toward the two vehicles, behind which his men took up position. He attached the wire ends to a detonator and crouched behind the driver's door of the lead vehicle. The soldier looked at his men and turned the knob.

The cliff face above the doors erupted, and big slabs of rock crashed into the ground amid great plumes of dust. The blast echoed around the neighbouring mountains setting large flocks of birds into flight.

Glancing at his handiwork through the settling dust he rolled up the cable. He then put the detonator and the cable in the back of the lead vehicle and took a grenade from an ammo box. He signalled the second vehicle to leave before entering the front passenger seat. "Right, let's go!" he barked.

Pulling the cord the captain lobbed the grenade into the guard's hut as they passed. The resultant explosion ripped through the building and threw splinter laden dust into the air.

At the end of the narrow lane two commandos chained the gate after the jeeps had passed and then the two vehicles' drove off into the gathering gloom.

Chapter Two

Present Day

Johnny Duncan gazed out of his spare bedroom window at the light rain which darkened the neighbouring slate rooftops. The dark rain clouds had settled over Arbroath after a bright promising start to the early spring day.

There was no bed in the room only a desk and chair by the window and an overflowing mahogany book shelve unit. His trusty laptop sat amid paper and tape cassette chaos on the desk next to the only other thing of value: his digital stereo radio/ cassette player.

Johnny had stopped for a roll-up break after a two hour marathon at the computer keyboard: his weekly column had to be emailed into the Dundee Courier the following morning by eight o'clock.

Having written the column for four years since going freelance Johnny had built up a loyal band of readers. He focused on a satirical look at local and national politics. He also wrote a monthly column for The Scotsman newspaper, and articles for various international magazines including Time and Nexus—the alternative news bimonthly.

The rain became heavier, and the drops hammered on the glass. He lit up the thin roll-up; inhaled and leaned back on his chair. The shrill sound of the telephone interrupted his pleasure as the nicotine coursed through his system.

“Dad?” asked a girls voice as he put the receiver to his right ear.

“Caitlin! How’s it goin’?”

“Okay. Gran’s taking me to McDonalds. And we were wondering if you would like to come?”

“Yeah. I’ll meet you there in ten minutes?”

“Right. See ya!”

He replaced the receiver and took another draw from his roll-up after flicking ash into an ash tray with a small, grey skull, which grinned up at him from the centre. *His eight-year-old daughter, Caitlin had suffered most in the break up of his marriage to Sue*, he thought. Sometimes, when she stayed with him, he would find her crying about the way things had been. Brad, his son, was ten and, like many other boys of that age, played endless games of football with his chums saying nothing of the divorce to Johnny when he collected the boy.

Johnny blamed himself for the break-up of the marriage. His drinking had increased through the years; not that he was violent when drunk - just pathetic. Working as a reporter for the Dundee Courier from the age of eighteen he reached the dizzy heights of senior reporter where he remained until resigning and becoming freelance at thirty- eight.

The drinking had started just as an after work get-together. The pressure of work led to an escalation, and before long he couldn’t sleep without consuming half a bottle of whisky.

After two years of freelancing, and the drinking still at an unprecedented level; Sue gave him an ultimatum one night: either her or the drink. After an almighty row she packed her bags and took the kids to her mothers.

Stubbing out his cigarette he stood up and stretched, then ambled into the bathroom to clean his teeth—he liked his kids to think he had given up smoking. The doctor had

advised him to stop after he found Johnny had high blood pressure. *He had tried he thought, but had failed miserably.*

“Hey! How are my two favourite ladies doing?” Johnny asked, walking up to the table where Caitlin and her Grandmother, Ann, were sitting putting thin fries into their mouths in a half-full McDonalds.

“Dad!” shouted Caitlin as she jumped up and gave him a hug.

He looked at their table. “Do you want anything else?”

“No thanks.” Caitlin said.

“Mum?”

“No thanks John.”

He bought himself a latte and sat at their table. A party of children cheered as a man appeared with an overloaded tray.

“Dad, I’m trying to get Gran to take me to Pleasureland.”

“No, I’m taking you and your brother back to your mother’s after this - young lady.”

“Aw dad! Please?”

“No, your mother will have my guts for garters if we’re late.”

“John!” Ann said.

“It’s okay gran, I’ve heard worse than that from him.”

“Have you now,” said Ann, giving Johnny a disapproving look.

The village of Auchmithie stood on massive conglomerate cliffs and peered down at a dilapidated harbour, ravished over the years by the merciless North Sea.

Johnny pulled up in front of a sandstone cottage on a street which led to nowhere. Sue and her new partner, Ollie, had bought the property, which had three bedrooms and a sizeable back yard for the kids to play. Ollie was an ex-marine who had found work in the off-shore business. Johnny liked the guy and could find nothing to hold against him.

Sue appeared at the front door looking great in tight jeans and a loose, red sweater.

“See ya dad.” said Caitlin, as she gave Johnny a hug.

“Yeah, bye dad,” grunted Brad, as he opened the rear passenger-side door.

Johnny pressed a button beside the gear stick and the driver’s side window lowered as Sue approached the car. “How’re you doing John?”

“Fine. And you?” He then gazed at the pavement and took a deep breath. “Sue...”

“Don’t John. I’m happy here with the kids and Ollie.”

“What! I was going to... oh never mind!”

Back in his spare bedroom Johnny stared gloomily at the icons on his laptop screen. *He needed a break*, he thought. He clicked on the broadband icon, and the Internet homepage sprung to life in front of him. After inserting ‘holiday’ in Google, endless pages of website addresses flashed up before him, for package deals. Johnny, however, wanted something different; something historical or religious. He had always wanted to go to Israel—to Jerusalem. Holidays with Sue were always about one thing: the sun. Inevitably he found himself lying on some beach, which never satisfied the restlessness within him.

He clicked on a flights link and on impulse booked himself on an open return flight from London to Tel Aviv on Wednesday. *The great thing about being freelance*, he thought, *was the freedom just to go somewhere whenever he wanted.*

Johnny then stood up and stretched. It would be good to get away for a while from work and, the nightmares he had been having lately.

Chapter Three

Wednesday morning was bright and windy. Johnny locked his flat door and headed down the stairs with his overnight bag—he believed in travelling light.

As he drove past the turn off for Stonehaven on the road which led to Aberdeen, he thought of Sue and the kids: he had phoned her the previous night and told her he was going away on an assignment for a magazine. If his children found out he was off on a short holiday, they would never forgive him for not taking them with him. If he took them Sue would never forgive him for taking them away from school.

The airport car park in front of the building was almost full, but Johnny found a space away at the back next to a large, red pickup truck with a golden eagle painted on the bonnet. He locked the car then strolled into the airport.

The check-in hall was filled with oil industry workers heading home after a tour of duty off-shore. He traced the British Airways desk; collected his ticket and then checked in for the flight to Heathrow.

The window seat next to Johnny was occupied by a fair-haired man in a grey suit who he assumed was a business man heading to London for some high-powered meeting.

“Colin McPherson,” said the man, offering his right hand.

“John Duncan,” said Johnny, shaking his hand.

“Business or pleasure?”

“What?” Johnny grunted.

“Are you going to London for business or pleasure?”

“Oh! I’m going on a short break. And yourself?”

“I’m off to London University to give a talk at a seminar.”

A stewardess checked their seats were upright and their seatbelts were properly fastened.

“I lecture on Geology at Aberdeen University,” the man continued.

The plane began to move and taxied on to the runway. Then the engine noise increased to a loud whine.

“I’ve just spent time in America studying sedimentary basins, and I’ve found something new and exciting—thus the talk at the university.”

Jeez, this guy likes to talk about himself, thought Johnny as the plane sped down the runway and then rose into the sunny midday sky.

The flight took an hour and a half, and when Johnny left his seat at Heathrow, he felt as if he knew all there was to know about sedimentary basins and how much he hated academic’s. He collected his bag from the carousel in the ultramodern terminal five. He took the bus to terminal one where a human tide flowed by either side of him as he stood just inside the automatic doors looking for the El Al desk. The place, packed with people of many nationalities either moving around or standing in queues, exuded energy.

A man in a yellow high-visible vest gave Johnny directions to the El Al desk, where he collected his tickets. Then, after checking in, he exchanged pounds into the Israeli New Sheckle before making his way through to the departure gate, where he sat until boarding began.

Although it was almost eleven at night Ben Gurion Airport was busy as he walked through the concourse. He saw the exit and headed out into the warm Middle Eastern night.

He hailed the first taxi he saw, a Toyota, which pulled up beside him. The cabbie, a thick set man with black hair and beard jumped out and put his bag in the boot.

"Where to sir? He asked when they were both seated in the car.

"I'm going to Jerusalem,"

"No problem sir, I'm from Jerusalem.

The car sped off and was soon on Highway One amid trucks and buses.

"You're Scottish?" The cabbie asked, looking at Johnny in the rear view mirror.

"Yeah, and thanks I usually get asked if I'm English."

"This your first time in Israel?"

"Yes, I'm here for a short break."

Although it was dark Johnny could make out fields on either side of the highway, and town lights twinkled in the distance on both sides as the car sped on its way to the Israeli capital. The land was flat, but gave way to tree-fringed hills.

"Where are you staying?" asked the cabbie, breaking the silence

Johnny gave the man the address of the hotel he had booked over the Internet. *The place was expensive, but what the hell, he thought, he was on holiday.* He'd never been on holiday himself before. Assignments for magazines where he travelled alone for sure, but a holiday was new ground.

He could see an orange glow in the distance over the hills. *Must be Jerusalem,* he thought as butterflies flapped in his stomach. The Holy City: the place he knew he had always wanted to visit.

The highway dipped and rose as it neared Jerusalem. Johnny swung one way then the other as the cab took a slip road and came out among street light illuminated white buildings. Then, after another ten minute drive through heavy traffic they pulled up at a large, white cereal box with balconies called the 'White Plaza.'

"Would you be able to pick me up tomorrow at two in the afternoon, I'd like to go to the Mount of Olives—you know, see the sights." Johnny said as he paid the cabbie.

"Of course. My name is David."

"I'm Johnny."

The large glass doors parted for him as he walked into the spacious air-conditioned reception. The polished, white marble floor reminded him of an ice rink, and he cheekily slid his bag up to the desk where a young dark-haired female receptionist sat. She checked him in and then sent him up ten floors. He inserted the key-card into the slot on the lock of door number 1016, and the red light turned to green. He then pushed the door open and walked into the darkness. He tried the light switch, but nothing happened. "Of course!" he said to himself, as he saw the small unit on the wall, illuminated by the light from the corridor. He pushed the card into the slot on the box, and, the room was bathed in bright light.

He dumped his bag on the double bed and then headed into the en-suite and, running the cold tap, he splashed water onto his face. Then cooler, he made his way back into the main room. He switched off the lights and pulled apart the curtains revealing a world of street lights set against dark hills in the background only noticeable under the starry sky.

The warm night air surged into the air-conditioned room as he opened the glass door which led on to his balcony. He strolled out and took in the breathtaking night time vista.

The dense cluster of lights that was the old city dominated by the blue cupola of the Dome of the Rock. The new part of the city in the foreground looked like many other cities with its high rise buildings.

Back in the room he contemplated unpacking his case, but then he remembered the receptionist saying that one bar was still open to residents. He switched the lights back on and checked himself over in the long mirror on the wardrobe. Then, with the bag left on the bed, he took the key-card, pulled the door and clambered into the lift and descended to the ground floor.

The Long Bar was well-lit and had two whirring fans on the ceiling. Two men sat deep in conversation at one end of the black veneer bar. In a corner, a couple sat looking at one another over Daiquiris at a table with a floating candle in a vase of water.

Johnny walked up to the bar and ordered a beer from the young curly-haired barman. He then sat on a stool and tapped his right foot to the jazz, turned up to just a shade above background.

As he took a gulp of his beer, he heard the clack of high heels on marble. He turned to see a woman dressed in a light, tan blouse and brown trousers stride into the room with an air of elegance.

“Vodka and lime juice Moshe,” she said to the barman in a polite American east coast accent.

“Yes madam,” he replied.

Her light, brown hair was swept back into a short ponytail, and she wore large, gold earrings. Her tanned skin, which stretched delicately over prominent high cheek bones, gave her a slight Latin-American look.

“Thanks,” she said as the barman placed the drink in front of where she had just sat down—two stools away from Johnny. She took a side glance at him and asked: “Are you just in?”

“Yeah, I am,” he said. “Why, do I have that rugged, windswept look?”

“No, I just haven’t seen your face before.”

The barman laughed as he dried a glass.

“You’re Scottish—right?” she continued.

“Yes, I am. Is it *that* obvious?”

“You sound like Sean Connery; I think he’s still the sexiest man on the planet.”

“In that case: the namesh... Duncan, John Duncan!” Johnny said in a poor attempt at a Sean Connery accent.

“Veronica Cahill,” she said laughing and shaking Johnny’s hand. “And so Duncan, John Duncan are you here with your work?”

“No, I’m here on holiday,” he said, before he drained his glass. “And yourself?”

“I’m a journalist with the Washington Post over here investigating material for the magazine.”

“Hey, I’m a journalist as well!”

Johnny bought another beer and nodded to Veronica’s emptying glass. “Would you like another?”

“No thanks I must go; we working gals need our sleep.”

“Okay, nice meeting you. See you around.”

“How about dinner here at the hotel some night; talk about journalist things?”

“Okay, fine by me.”

“Great, see you!”

Johnny finished his drink as Veronica walked out of the bar. He contemplated having another, but tiredness was catching up with him.

A rumbling stomach woke Johnny up at seven forty-five AM. The sun shone between the open curtains and illuminated his bed as he jumped up and headed into the shower room.

Breakfast was cereal and toast in the large air-conditioned dining room. He sat at a table by a window and stared at the relentless traffic, which roared past on the road beyond the hotel's small roundabout. As he sipped from a coffee cup, he wondered what to do until the taxi came at two pm; he thought about going to the pool - he was on holiday after all.

The swimming pool was large, blue and sat at the rear of the hotel. Palm trees surrounded the area and waved in a breeze, which also caused small ripples on the surface of the water.

There were perhaps twelve people scattered around the perfect lines of white sun-loungers. A life guard dressed in a red vest and white shorts sat on a raised chair next to the deep-end looking bored.

Johnny threw his towel onto a lounge near the water and then stood under the cold spray of a shower, which were at each corner of the pool. He jumped away from the iciness and was glad to feel the warming rays of the Israeli sun. He then gazed at the azure water of the pool. "Might as well get it over with," he whispered to himself.

He stepped down the concrete steps at the shallow-end. The water, however, was warm—a pleasant surprise for Johnny who was used to pools in Scotland and Spain where brass monkeys were scarce. He sat on one step and gazed at the waving palm trees as he ran a hand through his short curly hair.

"What's wrong, are there piranhas in the pool?" asked an American voice.

Johnny turned to see Veronica disrobe and then walk toward him in a skimpy, red bikini.

"Just contemplating which stroke to use," he said with a rising desire.

"How about the breaststroke," she said descending the steps then striding into the deeper water before swimming toward the deep-end.

She swam four lengths before climbing up the steps past Johnny. "Remember, dinner some night!"

"How could I forget!" he said as he stood up and then ran through the shallows to dive into the deep water.

Johnny watched the Toyota cab draw up outside the hotel. He was sitting on a large, black leather settee in reception. There were two receptionists behind the desk dealing with a group of Italian tourists who had just arrived.

"Shalom!" Johnny said as he opened the rear passenger-side door and climbed into the car.

"Shalom!" replied David the cabbie. "The Mount of Olives today?"

"Yes please."

The cab left the haven of the hotel roundabout and merged into heavy traffic. They passed the large, pink coloured buildings of the train and bus stations and then headed along a street lined with vehicles on one side. A truck pulled out in front of them, and David shouted something in Hebrew, and then shook his head.

The taxi entered a busy street with darkened, pink buildings on either side, many had balconies from which baskets of plants hung. Johnny could feel the heat building as he sat in the back of the taxi. He had shut the window to keep the exhaust fumes from the traffic out, and sweat ran down his back as they emerged on to a large square.

“There’s the New Gate!” shouted David as he nodded to an arch in a section of the Old City wall, which had emerged from behind the traffic at the other side of the square.

They crossed the junction and followed the murky, cream coloured wall until they arrived at an oasis of grass and palms where David turned right and shouted: “Damascus Gate!”

Crowds were descending stairs toward the arched portal where they passed stalls which sold ice cream and soft drinks.

“I hope you’re enjoying the whistle stop tour of some of the sights?” David asked and then roared with laughter.

The taxi drove along another street with the wall running down the right-hand side until it joined Derech Jericho in the Kidron valley. On their left the Mount of Olives rose, topped by modern buildings, which Johnny thought looked out of place. On the right the Old City wall ran along the top of the slope behind which sat the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount

David pulled up outside a big church characterised by four large columns at the top of some steps. A triangular façade supported by the columns featured a fresco depicting Christ as mediator between God and man. Three tour coaches were parked on the tree-lined street near the church. Two of the buses were empty; the third was shedding passengers with cameras around their necks.

“Here we are, the Church of All Nations.” David announced.

“Thanks. Do you want paid now?”

“Nah! When do you want picked up?”

“Say... four-thirty,” Johnny said, looking at his watch.

A German tour guide pointed at the fresco on the outside of the church and described it to his attentive audience of twenty tourists as Johnny climbed the steps and entered the church.

Inside, the church was cool, and the bluish glass of the windows allowed only poor light to enter the building. *The place had a sense of anguish which, thought Johnny, was what the place was about.*

Twelve cupola ceilings, supported by six columns, painted blue with gold dots representing the night sky. Each cupola had the coat of arms of each country which had donated toward the building of the present church.

The German tour group marched past Johnny and stopped at the section of bedrock where Christ prayed in agony the night he was betrayed. Johnny gazed at them then left the semi-dark of the church and walked out into the bright Jerusalem sun. He stopped for a moment at the top of the stairs and gazed at the Old City Wall on the Temple Mount. Then, walking to the side of the building he looked up at the golden onion-shaped domes of the Church of Mary Magdalene. The building peeped out between the trees further up the Mount of Olives. *What an amazing place,* he thought.

He entered the Garden of Gethsemane, which sat at the side of the church behind a light, grey metal fence. There was no one about; the other tourists were still in the church.

Johnny strolled along the walkway and admired the old gnarled olive trees as they sat in the dry, copper coloured soil between boulder lined paths amid flagrant flowers and green shrubs. He felt light headed, which he put down to tiredness and the strong Israeli beer he had drunk the night before. The scent of the flowers intensified as he closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his index finger and the thumb of his right hand.

When he opened his eyes again, the garden was in darkness. *A dark cloud must have covered the sun*, he thought, but when he looked up the sky was dark and the stars were out. He jerked his head to one side then the other - the church had gone - along with the metal fence! The garden looked different; gone were the block-lined paths, in fact all signs of managed horticulture had vanished.

“What’s happened?” he asked himself as anxiety gripped.

Under some trees several men lay sleeping dressed in old robes. One, a thin man with a ginger beard, rolled over and looked at him, smiled and returned to sleep.

“What is this?” he said shaking his head, “some kind of re-enactment.” If so he was the only one in the audience!

He looked at his feet. He had on leather sandals; in fact he was also dressed in an old robe similar to the sleeping men. He touched his face, it was smooth, a lot smoother than usual. In his hand he held a crook: he was a shepherd boy!

He heard voices, and when he turned he saw the light from lanterns bouncing beyond some trees. A group of men headed toward the awakening bunch under the trees. The men who had entered the garden were a mixture of well-dressed religious looking types with servants and guards carrying swords and spears. They spoke in Hebrew to the original group. A man with dark hair and a shorter beard than the others stepped forward and pointed toward where the church had been. Johnny allowed his eyes to follow in the direction and was transfixed by what he saw: a man was praying as he knelt on a rock. Tears welled up as he was thunderstruck by the realisation of what he was witness to: the betrayal of Christ.

The man he had now realised was Judas Iscariot led the band of priests and guards to the kneeling Christ, who stood up and looked in their direction. He approached Jesus; they exchanged looks, and then Judas kissed the Son of God.

The priests instructed the guards to take him, and three of them moved toward Christ. A servant of one priest got to Jesus first, but one of the bunch who had been sleeping under the trees ran up. He pulled out his sword and sliced part of the man’s ear. The servant’s screams echoed around the garden as blood gushed down his neck. The guards moved toward the man who threw down his sword at Christ’s bidding.

Jesus then moved between the guards and the man and then crouched down beside the howling servant. He placed a hand on the man’s injury and, when he stood up, the blood had vanished and the ear healed.

The last thing Johnny saw before the scene faded was Christ being taken away by the guards. In a flash, as if a picture frame had been changed, he was crouching by a dry stone wall. He wasn’t far from the Garden of Gethsemane as he saw it through the darkness just a stone’s throw away back across a field. He stood up and peered over the wall into a field of scrub and flowers. Close to the centre stood Judas Iscariot who rose into the night sky. Then, two metres above the ground, with a cruel smile spreading across his face, he vanished in a burst of flame.

Suddenly, Johnny was back in the sunlit garden. He looked around not knowing what to expect, but the place was as before: quiet, with just the sound of insects and the distant hum of traffic invading the peace. He shivered even though the temperature was in the thirties! The familiar drone of the German Tourist Guide as he entered the garden with his entourage brought Johnny back to the present. *Time to go*, he thought.

On the pavement outside the church Johnny rolled a cigarette as he waited for the taxi. His thoughts were a mess; he couldn’t focus on any particular thing he just had the desire to return to the hotel. He lit the roll-up and inhaled deeply.

“This isn’t doing my blood pressure any good.” he told himself as the Toyota pulled up in front of him.

“Where to now?” David asked as Johnny climbed into the back.

“Back to the hotel”

“All right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“You could say that. I’m fine, something’s come up that’s all.”

“Okay,” said the cabbie, stretching the second syllable.

At the White Plaza Johnny decided he needed a drink; so he headed into the Palm Bar which, as the name suggests, had potted palms at select spots around the room. The place was full even though it was five in the afternoon.

“A double Grouse.” Johnny said to the barman.

“Ice sir?”

“No thanks.”

No sooner was the drink placed in front of him than the empty glass was placed back on the bar.

“I’ll have another. Oh, and a beer please.”

Johnny downed the whisky and sat looking at the beer. He wondered what to do next. He didn’t want to go anywhere else in Jerusalem in case of another vision—unlikely, but you never know; so he finished his beer and headed up to his room.

“Hello, EL AL desk. Can I help you?” said a male voice; after Johnny rang the airline number he had been given.

“Yes, I have an open return ticket from Ben Gurion to London Heathrow and wondered how soon I could return to the UK?”

“I’ll just check, sir.”

Johnny sat on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

“Hello, Sir?”

“Yes.”

“We have a seat available on tomorrow’s ten-fifteen flight which arrives at Heathrow at thirteen thirty-five. Would you like me to book you on board?”

“Yes please.”

After he had finished his call Johnny pressed the 0 button on the phone.

“Hello reception,” said a female voice.

“I’ll be checking out tomorrow.”

“Okay, Mr Duncan.”

“Can I have room service please?”

“Certainly sir what would you like?”

“Yes, can I have a kebab with some vegetables and a bottle of Grouse whisky sent up please?”

“Certainly sir!”

He replaced the receiver and then wandered over to the glass door to the balcony and gazed out over the white city as it shimmered in the heat.

The choppy surface of his mind had calmed down. And with the settling a thought surged up like a gas bubble and erupted onto the surface: the brief understanding look between Christ and Judas. He felt uncomfortable. He had investigated and written an article for a magazine a few years ago on the Gnostic Gospel. Christ had chosen Judas, His beloved and trusted disciple, to betray Him thus fulfilling the crucifixion prophecy. But what was in it for Judas?

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Room service!”

“Yes, come in.”

A young, black-haired Israeli waitress entered with a tray on which sat a silver dish cover and a bottle of Grouse. Johnny left the balcony door. "Just leave it on the table please." He fished some shekels out of his pocket and handed them to her.

"Thanks—enjoy!" she said as she left the room.

He lifted the dish cover not sure if he was hungry, but the aroma of the kebab made his stomach rumble. He pulled the coffee table towards the seat by the bed; sat down and greedily scooped the kebab and all the vegetables. He then poured himself a large whisky and sat back.

The Gnostic view was of a Judas who was Christ's most cherished disciple and accepted the role of traitor at the insistence of his lord. Johnny had accepted and believed this after talking to Gnostic scholars on the subject. But now all that was thrown into doubt after he had witnessed the second of his visions. A disciple should not rise into the air and vanish in flames with a grin across his face. The thought of that grin sent shivers down his spine!

He finished his drink and poured another. Why had he been chosen for the visions? After all, he was a boozier, a smoker, and he liked to think of himself as a womanizer hardly religious traits! But, perhaps, that was the point, people would believe someone who was not religious and couldn't care less over a zealot on the matter of visions. When he thought back he had always wanted to visit the Holy Land. Had it been hidden in his soul since birth? Why had he wanted to visit the Mount of Olives straight away? And had all this to do with being a journalist and that article on Gnosticism; or put another way had he always been destined to write that piece?

"I'm getting melodramatic now," he chortled.

He felt tired, so he stretched out on the bed and closed his eyes. He dreamt of sculpted angels on the outside of an ancient building that became alive and took flight over a dark landscape. Their small, delicate wings swept the black air aside as they flew over sleeping towns and cities until they ascended and drew the darkness with them as if pulling up a blanket which had covered the land. They flew upwards until they approached a shining city with many tall spires where they rolled the darkness up and cast it into a pit under the city. The angels then landed on the main central spire where they returned to stone.

Johnny woke up with a start. The room was in darkness. The only lights apart from the street lights, which streamed in from the glass door, was the green dot on the smoke alarm which flashed intermittently. The red digital figures on the radio/alarm on the bedside cabinet told him it was two-fifty am.

He rose and walked over to the balcony door and gazed at the lights of Jerusalem which had looked so enticing the previous evening, but now looked cold and forbidding.

Sitting on the chair beside the bed, he put his feet on the coffee table. He then pulled the duvet from the bed and wrapped it around himself and fell back into a dreamless sleep.

The shrill alarm of the radio/alarm, which he had set before his last whisky, awoke him at seven. He rubbed his eyes; he stood up and then, throwing the duvet on the bed, made his way into the en-suite. The water of the power shower washed away all the unnerving, whisky laced thoughts of the previous evening.

After dressing and collecting his ticket and passport from the bedside unit Johnny took a last look out over the Holy City. Then he grabbed his bag and headed down to reception.

The Aberdeen flight descended through the grey clouds as he looked out of the window. Johnny liked the thought he was back home, but dreamed of the sunny weather he had just left.

The big red pickup still sat next to his car, covered in small rain drops that had fallen from the low clouds that swept across the airport. He fired up the engine, and after letting it warm up, he left the car park and headed for home.

Chapter Four

The radio filled the room with Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez as Johnny flipped up the lid of his laptop and pressed the power button. The sun shone through white, skeletal cirri and threw shadows onto the magnolia coloured wall on his right. His computer sprang to life and told him he had several emails. He decided they could wait and opened Microsoft Word.

He had to write the article of his visions; the world had to know, the journalist in him had declared! Earlier, he had phoned a contact at a national newspaper and cajoled him into getting his editor to take a look at the article.

The shadows on the magnolia wall lengthened as Johnny saved the final piece of the document. He had worked through the afternoon only stopping for one roll-up break. He read through the whole piece then sat back and stared at the setting sun. Classic FM pumped out Mozart's Requiem as he opened his tobacco tin and rolled a cigarette. He blew smoke toward the ceiling and asked himself if he *should* send the email—the earlier bravado had evaporated!

The internet jumped onto the screen after he clicked on the broadband icon. Entering the mail section he composed the email to his friend in Manchester and then attached the article document. He then sat for what seemed like an eternity with the cursor on the send button. Then, finally he clicked on the small, red rectangle that would change his life forever.

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