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The Expected One

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Chapter One

Marseille
September 1997

Marseille was a fine place to die and had been for centuries. The legendary seaport retained a reputation as a lair for pirates, smugglers, and cutthroats, a status enjoyed since the Romans wrestled it from the Greeks in the days before Christ.

By the end of the twentieth century, the French government's efforts at whitewash finally made it safe to enjoy bouillabaisse without the fear of getting mugged. Still, crime held no shock value for the locals. Mayhem was ingrained in their history and genetics. The leathered fishermen didn't blink when their nets yielded a catch that would prove unsuitable for inclusion in the local fish stew.

Roger-Bernard Gélis was not a native of Marseille. He was born and raised in the foothills of the Pyrenees, in a community that existed proudly as a living anachronism. The twentieth century had not infringed on his culture, an ancient one that revered the powers of love and peace over all earthly matters. Still, he was a man of middle age who was not entirely unworldly; he was, after all, the leader of his people. And while his community dwelled together in a deeply spiritual peace, they had their share of enemies.

Roger-Bernard was fond of saying that the greatest light attracts the deepest darkness.

He was a giant of a man, an imposing figure to strangers. Those who did not know the gentleness that permeated Roger-Bernard's spirit might have mistaken him for someone to be feared. Later, it would be assumed that his attackers were not unknown to him.

He should have seen it coming, should have anticipated that he would not be left to carry such a priceless object in absolute freedom. Hadn't almost a million of his

ancestors died for the sake of this same treasure? But the shot came from behind, splintering his skull before he even knew the enemy was near.

Forensic evidence from the bullet would prove useless to the police, as the killers did not end their attack on a note of simplicity. There must have been several of them as the sheer size and weight of the victim required a certain amount of manpower to accomplish what came next.

It was a mercy that Roger-Bernard was dead before the ritual began. He was spared the gloating of his killers as they set about their gruesome task. The leader was particularly filled with zeal for what came next, chanting his ancient mantra of hate as he worked.

"Neca eos omnes. Neca eos omnes."

To sever a human head from its resting place on the body is a messy and difficult business. It requires strength, determination, and a very sharp instrument. Those who murdered Roger-Bernard Gélis had all of these things, and used them with the utmost efficiency.

The body had been at sea for a long time, battered by the tide and chewed by hungry inhabitants of the deep. The investigators were so disheartened by the ragged condition of the corpse that they assigned little significance to the missing digit on one hand. An autopsy, buried later by bureaucracy -- and perhaps something more -- simply noted that the right index finger had been severed.

Jerusalem September 1997

The ancient and bustling Old City of Jerusalem was filled with the frenetic activity of a Friday afternoon. History hung heavy in the rarified and holy air as the faithful hurried to houses of worship in preparation for their respective sabbaths. Christians wandered the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow, a series of winding and cobbled streets that marked the path of the crucifixion. It was here that a battered and bleeding Jesus Christ shouldered a heavy burden, making his way to a divine fate atop the hill of Golgotha.

On this autumn afternoon American author Maureen Paschal appeared no different from the other pilgrims who made their way from distant and varied corners of the earth. The heady September breeze blended the aroma of sizzling shwarma with the scent of exotic oils that wafted from the ancient markets. Maureen drifted through the sensory overload that is Israel, clutching a guidebook purchased from a Christian organization on the Internet. The guide detailed the Way of the Cross, complete with maps and directions to the fourteen stations of Christ's path.

"Lady, you want rosary? Wood from Mount of Olives."

"Lady, you want tour guide? You never get lost. I show you everything."

Like most Western women, she was forced to fend off the unwanted advances of Jerusalem street merchants. Some were relentless in their efforts to hawk their wares or services. Others were merely attracted to the petite woman with long red hair and fair coloring, an exotic combination in this part of the world. Maureen rebuffed her pursuers with a polite but firm "No, thank you." Then she broke eye contact and walked away. Her cousin Peter, an expert in Middle Eastern studies, had prepped her for the culture of the Old City. Maureen was painstaking about even the tiniest details in her work and had studied the evolving culture of Jerusalem carefully. So far it was paying off, and Maureen was able to keep the distractions to a minimum as she focused on her research, scribbling details and observations in her Moleskine notebook.

She had been moved to tears by the intensity and beauty of the 800-year-old Franciscan Chapel of the Flagellation, where Jesus had suffered his scourging. It was a deeply unexpected emotional reaction as Maureen did not come to Jerusalem as a pilgrim. Instead, she came as an investigative observer, as a writer in search of an accurate historical backdrop for her work. While Maureen sought a deeper understanding of the events of Good Friday, she approached this research from her head rather than her heart.

She visited the Convent of the Sisters of Sion, before moving to the neighboring Chapel of Condemnation, the legendary location where Jesus was given his cross after the sentence of crucifixion had been passed by Pontius Pilate. Again, the unexpected lump in her throat was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of grief as she walked through the building. Life-size bas-relief sculptures illustrated the events of a terrible morning 2,000 years earlier. Maureen stood, riveted, by a vivid scene of haunting humanity: a male disciple as he tried to shield Mary, the mother of Jesus, to spare her the sight of her son carrying His cross. Tears stung at the back of her eyes as she stood before the image. It was the first time in her life she had thought of these larger-than-life historical figures as real people, flesh-and-blood humans suffering through an event of nearly unimaginable anguish.

Feeling momentarily dizzy, Maureen steadied herself with a hand against the cool stones of an ancient wall. She paused to refocus before taking more notes on the artwork and sculpture.

She continued on her path, but the labyrinthine streets of the Old City proved deceiving, even with a carefully drawn map. The landmarks were often ancient, weathered, and easily missed by those unfamiliar with their whereabouts. Maureen cursed silently as she realized she was lost again. She stopped in the shelter of a shop doorway, shielding herself from the direct sunlight. The intensity of the heat, even with the slight breeze, belied the lateness of the season. Shielding the guidebook from the glare, she looked around, attempting to get her bearings.

"The Eighth Station of the Cross. It has to be around here somewhere," she muttered to herself. This location was of specific interest to Maureen, for her work centered on this history as it pertained to women. Referring back to the guidebook, she continued to read a passage from the Gospels that pertained to Station Eight.

"A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus said, 'Weep not for me, daughters of Jerusalem, weep for yourselves and for your children.' "

Maureen was startled by a sharp knock on the window behind her. She looked up, expecting to see an angry proprietor glaring at her for blocking his doorway. But the face that looked back at her was beaming. An immaculately dressed, middle-aged Palestinian man opened the door to the antiquities shop, beckoning Maureen in. When he spoke it was in beautiful, if accented, English.

"Come in, please. Welcome, I am Mahmoud. You are lost?"

Maureen waved the guidebook lamely. "I'm looking for the Eighth Station. The map shows . . ."

Mahmoud waved the book away with a laugh. "Yes, yes. Station Eight. Jesus Meets the Holy Women of Jerusalem. It is just out here and around the corner," he gestured. "A cross above the stone wall marks it, but you have to look very carefully."

Mahmoud looked at Maureen intently for a moment before continuing. "It is like everything else in Jerusalem. You have to look very carefully to see it for what it is."

Maureen watched his gestures, satisfied that she understood the directions. Smiling, she thanked him and turned to leave, but stopped as something on a nearby shelf caught her eye. Mahmoud's shop was one of the more upscale establishments in Jerusalem, selling authenticated antiquities -- oil lamps from the time of Christ, coins with the emblem of Pontius Pilate. An exquisite shimmer of color coming through the window attracted Maureen.

"That's jewelry made from shards of Roman glass," Mahmoud explained as Maureen approached an artful display rack of silver and gold jewelry embedded with jeweled mosaics.

"It's gorgeous," Maureen replied, picking up a silver pendant. Prisms of color darted through the shop as she held the jewelry up to the light, illuminating her writer's imagination. "I wonder what story this glass could tell?"

"Who knows what it once was?" Mahmoud shrugged. "A perfume bottle? A spice jar? A vase for roses or lilies?"

"It's amazing to think that two thousand years ago this was an everyday object in someone's home. Fascinating."

Giving the shop and its contents closer inspection, Maureen was struck by the quality of the items and the beauty of the displays. She reached out to run a finger lightly over a ceramic oil lamp. "Is this really two thousand years old?"

"Of course. Some of my items are older still."

Maureen shook her head. "Don't antiquities like this belong in a museum?"

Mahmoud laughed, a rich and hearty sound. "My dear, all of Jerusalem is a museum. You cannot dig in your garden without unearthing something of great antiquity. Most of the truly valuable go into important collections. But not everything."

Maureen moved to a glass case, filled with ancient jewelry of hammered, oxidized copper. She stopped, her attention grabbed by a ring that supported a disc the size of a small coin. Following her gaze, Mahmoud removed the ring from the case, holding it out to her. A sunbeam from the front window caught the ring, illuminating its round base and showing off a pattern of nine hammered dots surrounding a central circle.

"Very interesting choice," Mahmoud said. His jovial manner had changed. He was now intense and serious, watching Maureen closely as she questioned him about the ring.

"How old is this?"

"It's hard to say. My experts said it was Byzantine, probably sixth or seventh century, but possibly older."

Maureen looked closely at the pattern made by the circles.

"This pattern seems . . . familiar. I feel like I've seen it before. Do you know if it symbolizes anything?"

Mahmoud's intensity relaxed. "I cannot say for certain what an artisan meant to create fifteen hundred years ago. But I have been told that it was the ring of a cosmologist."

"A cosmologist?"

"Someone who understands the relation between the earth and the cosmos. As above, so below. And I must say that the first time I saw it, it reminded me of the planets, dancing around the sun."

Maureen counted the dots aloud. "Seven, eight, nine. But they wouldn't have known there were nine planets back then, or that the sun was the center of the solar system. It couldn't be that, could it?"

"We cannot assume to know what the ancients understood," Mahmoud shrugged. "Try it on."

Maureen, suddenly sensing a sales pitch, handed the ring back to Mahmoud. "Oh, no, thank you. It's really beautiful, but I was just curious. And I promised myself I wouldn't spend money today."

"That's fine," said Mahmoud, pointedly refusing to take the ring from her. "Because it's not for sale anyway."

"It's not?"

"No. Many people have offered to buy that ring. I refuse to sell it. So you may feel free to try it on. Just for fun."

Maybe it was because the playfulness had returned to his tone and she felt less pressured, or maybe it was the attraction of the unexplained, ancient pattern. But something caused Maureen to slip the copper disc onto her right ring finger. It fit perfectly.

Mahmoud nodded, serious again, almost whispering to himself, "As if it had been made for you."

Maureen held the ring up to the light, looking at it on her hand. "I can't take my eyes off of it."

"That's because you're supposed to have it."

Maureen looked up suspiciously, sensing the approaching sales pitch. Mahmoud was more elegant than the street vendors, but he was a merchant all the same. "I thought you said it wasn't for sale."

She began to take the ring off, to which the shopkeeper objected vehemently, holding up his hands in protest.

"No. Please."

"Okay, okay. This is where we haggle, right? How much is it?"

Mahmoud looked seriously offended for a moment before replying. "You misunderstand. That ring was entrusted to me, until I found the right hand for it. The hand it was made for. I see now that it was your hand. I cannot sell it to you because it is already yours."

Maureen looked down at the ring, and then back up at Mahmoud, puzzled. "I don't understand."

Mahmoud smiled sagely, and moved toward the front door of the shop. "No, you don't. But one day you will. For now, just keep the ring. A gift."

"I couldn't possibly . . ."

"You can and you will. You must. If you do not, I will have failed. You would not want that on your conscience, of course."

Maureen shook her head in bewilderment as she followed him to the front door, pausing. "I really don't know what to say, or how to thank you."

"No need, no need. But now you must go. The mysteries of Jerusalem are waiting for you."

Mahmoud held the door for her as Maureen stepped through it, thanking him again.

"Good-bye, Magdalena," he whispered as she walked out. Maureen stopped, turning quickly back to him.

"I'm sorry?"

Mahmoud smiled his sage, enigmatic smile. "I said good-bye, my lady." And he waved at Maureen as she returned the gesture, stepping out again into the harsh Middle Eastern sun.

Maureen returned to the Via Dolorosa, where she found the Eighth Station just as Mahmoud had directed her. But she was disquieted and unable to concentrate, feeling strange after the encounter with the shopkeeper. Continuing on her path, the earlier sense of dizziness returned, stronger this time, to the point of disorientation. It was her first day in Jerusalem, and she was undoubtedly suffering jet lag. The flight from Los Angeles had been long and arduous, and she hadn't slept much the night before. Whether it was a combination of heat, exhaustion, and hunger, or something more unexplainable, what happened next was outside Maureen's realm of experience.

Finding a stone bench, Maureen eased herself down to rest. She swayed with another wave of unexpected vertigo as a blinding flash emanated from the relentless sun, transporting her thoughts.

She was thrown abruptly into the middle of a mob. All around her was chaos -- there was much shouting and shoving, great commotion on all sides. Maureen had enough of her modern wits about her to notice that the swarming figures were robed in coarse, homespun garments. Those who had shoes wore a crude version of a sandal; she noticed as one stepped down hard on her foot. Most were men, bearded and grimy. The omnipresent sun of early afternoon beat down upon them, mixing sweat with dirt on the angry and distressed faces around her. She was at the edge of a narrow road, and the crowd just ahead began to jostle emphatically. A natural gap was evolving, and a small group moved slowly along the path. The mob appeared to be following this huddle. As the moving mass came closer, Maureen saw the woman for the first time.

A solitary and still island in the center of the chaos, she was one of the few women in the crowd -- but that was not what made her different. It was her bearing, a regal demeanor that marked her as a queen despite the layer of dirt covering her hands and feet. She was slightly disheveled, lustrous auburn hair tucked partially beneath a crimson veil that covered the lower half of her face. Maureen knew instinctively that she had to reach this woman, needed to connect with her, touch her, speak to her. But the writhing crowd held her back, and she was moving in the slow-motion thickness of a dream state.

As she continued to struggle in the direction of the woman, the aching beauty of the face that was just out of her reach struck Maureen. She was fine-boned, with exquisite, delicate features. But it was her eyes that would haunt Maureen long after the vision was over. The woman's eyes, huge and bright with unshed tears, fell somewhere in the color spectrum between amber and sage, an extraordinary light hazel that reflected infinite wisdom and unbearable sadness in one heart-searing blend. The woman's soul-swallowing gaze met Maureen in a brief and interminable moment, conveying through those improbable eyes a plea of complete and utter desperation.

You must help me.

Maureen knew that the plea was directed at her. She was entranced, frozen, as her eyes locked with the woman. The moment was broken when the woman looked down suddenly at a young girl who tugged urgently at her hand.

The child looked up with huge hazel eyes that echoed her mother's. Behind her stood a boy, older and with darker eyes than the little girl, but clearly the son of this woman. Maureen knew in that inexplicable instant that she was the only person who could help this strange, suffering queen and her children. A swell of intense confusion, and something that felt far too much like grief, moved through her at this realization.

Then the mob surged again, drowning Maureen in a sea of sweat and despair.

Maureen blinked hard, holding her eyes shut tight for a few seconds. She shook her head briskly to clear her vision, not certain at first where she was. A glance down at her jeans, microfiber backpack, and Nike walking shoes provided reassurance from the twentieth century. Around her the bustle of the Old City continued, but the people were dressed in contemporary fashions and the sounds were different now: Radio Jordan blasted an American pop song -- was that R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion?" -- from a shop across the way. A teenage Palestinian boy kept time, drumming on the countertop. He smiled at her without missing a beat.

Rising from the bench, Maureen attempted to shake off the vision, if that's what it had been. She wasn't sure what it was, nor could she allow herself to dwell on it. Her time in Jerusalem was limited and she had 2,000 years of sights to see. Summoning her journalist's discipline and a lifetime's experience of suppressing her emotions,

she filed the vision under "research for later analysis" and pushed herself to keep moving.

Maureen found herself merging with a swarm of British tourists as they rounded the corner, led by a guide wearing the collar of an Anglican priest. He announced to his group of pilgrims that they were approaching the most sacred site in Christendom, the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher.

Maureen knew from her research that the remaining Stations of the Cross were contained within that revered building. Spanning several blocks, the basilica covered the site of the crucifixion and had done so since the Empress Helena vowed to protect this sacred ground in the fourth century. Helena, who was also the mother of the Holy Roman Emperor Constantine, was later canonized for her efforts.

Maureen approached the enormous entrance doors slowly and with some hesitation. She realized as she stood on the threshold that she had not been inside a real church in many years, nor did she relish the thought of changing that status now. She reminded herself firmly that the research that had brought her to Israel was scholarly rather than spiritual. As long as she remained focused, with that perspective, she could do it. She could walk through those doors.

Despite her reluctance, there was something unmistakably awe-inspiring and magnetic about this colossal shrine. As she stepped through the mammoth doorway, she heard the British priest's words ring out:

"Within these walls, you will see where Our Lord made the ultimate sacrifice. Where He was stripped of His robes, where He was nailed to the cross. You will enter the holy tomb where His body was laid. My brothers and sisters in Christ, once you enter this place, your lives will never be the same."

The heavy and unmistakable smell of frankincense swirled past Maureen as she entered. Pilgrims from all walks of Christendom surrounded this place and filled the mammoth spaces inside the basilica. She passed a group of Coptic priests huddled in hushed, reverent discussion and watched a Greek Orthodox cleric light a candle in one of the small chapels. A male choir sang in an Eastern dialect, an exotic sound to Western ears, the hymn rising up from some secret space within the church.

Maureen was taking in the overwhelming sights and sounds of this place, and was feeling aimless from the sensory overload. She did not see the wiry little man who eased up beside her until he tapped her on the shoulder, causing her to jump.

"Sorry, Miss. Sorry, Miss Mo-ree." He spoke English, but unlike the enigmatic shopkeeper Mahmoud, his accent was very heavy. His skills with Maureen's language were rudimentary at best, and as a result she didn't understand at first that he was calling her by her first name. He repeated himself.

"Mo-ree. Your name. It is Mo-ree, yes?"

Maureen was puzzled, trying to determine if this strange little man was actually calling her by name and, if so, how he knew it. She had been in Jerusalem for fewer than twenty-four hours, and no one save the front desk clerk at the King David Hotel knew her name. But this man was impatient, asking again.

"Mo-ree. You are Mo-ree. Writer. You write, yes? Mo-ree?"

Nodding slowly, Maureen answered. "Yes. My name is Maureen. But how -- how did you know?"

The little man ignored the question, grabbing her hand and pulling her across the church floor. "No time, no time. Come. We wait a long time for you. Come, come."

For such a small man -- he was shorter than Maureen, who was herself uncommonly petite -- he moved very quickly. Short legs propelled him through the belly of the basilica, past the line where pilgrims waited to be admitted to the Tomb of Christ. He kept moving until they reached a small altar near the rear of the building, and stopped suddenly. The area was dominated by a life-size bronze sculpture of a woman holding outstretched arms to a man in a beseeching pose.

"Chapel of Mary Magdalene. Magdalena. You come for her, yes? Yes?"

Maureen nodded cautiously, looking at the sculpture and down at the plaque that read:

IN THIS PLACE,

MARY MAGDALENE WAS THE FIRST

TO SEE THE RISEN LORD.

She read aloud the quotation from another plaque beneath the bronze:

"Woman, why weepest thou? Who is it you are looking for?"

Maureen had little time to contemplate the question as the odd little man was pulling at her again, hurrying at his unlikely pace to another, darker corner of the basilica.

"Come, come."

They rounded a corner and stopped in front of a painting, a large and aged portrait of a woman. Time, incense, and centuries of oily candle residue had taken their toll on the artwork, causing Maureen to move close to the dark portrait, squinting. The little man narrated in a voice grown deeply serious.

"Painting very old. Greek. You understand? Greek. Most important of Our Lady. She needs you to tell her story. This is why you come here, Mo-ree. We have waited a long time for you. She has waited. For you. Yes?"

Maureen looked carefully at the painting, a dark, ancient portrait of a woman wearing a red cloak. She turned to the little man, intensely curious now as to where this was taking her. But he was gone -- he had vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

"Wait!" Maureen's cry rang out in the echo chamber of the massive church, but it remained unanswered. She returned her attention to the painting.

As she leaned closer to the portrait, she observed that the woman wore a ring on her right hand: a round copper disk, with a pattern depicting nine circles surrounding a central sphere.

Maureen lifted her right hand, the one with her newly acquired ring, to compare it to the painting.

The rings were identical.

. . . Much will be said and written in time to come of Simon, the Fisher of Men. Of how he was called the rock, Peter, by Easa and myself while the others called him Cephas, which was natural in their own tongue. And if history is just, it will tell of how he loved Easa with unmatched power and loyalty.

And much has already been said, or so I am told, about my own relationship with Simon-Peter. There are those who called us adversaries, enemies. They would have it be believed that Peter despised me and we fought for the attention of Easa at every turn. And there are those who would call Peter a hater of women -- but this is an accusation that can be applied to no one who followed Easa. Let it be known that no man who followed Easa did ever belittle a woman or underestimate her value in God's plan. Any man who does so and claims Easa as teacher speaks a lie.

It is untrue, these accusations against Peter. Those who witnessed Peter's criticism of me do not know of our history or from what source come his outbursts. But I understand and will not judge him, ever. This, above all else, is what Easa has taught me -- and I hope he taught it as well to the others. Judge not.

The Arques Gospel of Mary Magdalene,

The Book of Disciples