

She was so beautiful, and Benjamin held her close in the crowd. Tamar brushed his cheek.

“It’s OK,” she murmured. “It wasn’t your fault.”

The sun crested high above the cobbled streets of Jerusalem, the ancient limestone blocks of the Western Wall absorbing echoes of whispered prayers throughout the Ha’Kotel, the Wailing Wall. Packed. It was packed, so many come out to see the newly cleared Temple Mount just above where Hamas had misfired the rocket into the Dome of the Rock. Already a month gone but the air still hung heavily within the throb of a legion of conversations. The whispered stories.

Caleb, Benjamin’s squad ace pilot and best friend, clapped him on the shoulder. “It may not seem like it. But we’re winning,” he said.

Benjamin saw Tamar glance at him, then Caleb. “What happened?” she asked. “I know you can’t give me specifics, but...”

He shook his head. “You don’t want to know.”

“Beni...”

Caleb leaned in. “It’s almost noon. If you want to do it, we should put our prayers in the Wall for Yotam now. I told General Gideon yesterday we’d be doing it then. Come on.”

Benjamin let himself be pressed into the crowd.

Prayers for Yotam. Yes, that was all he could do now. He glanced up toward the Mount above. Most of the rubble from the Dome had been cleared, and he felt a grim satisfaction that at least he’d been part of the enterprise that caused the Hamas missile to misfire into their own monument. But it would never repay.

No.

General Gideon stood before him in his mind, slumped over in grief. His commander's only son, only family, and Benjamin had allowed him to be wiped out by not pulling his team back quick enough. No matter that Hamas had known Benjamin's team was coming and laid a trap. No matter that those infernal tunnels hiding hostages were confusing and Yotam was snatched before Benjamin was able to coordinate the retreat. No matter Gideon had entrusted Benjamin specifically to protect his son. If only he'd had a split second more to stop his man from firing—

He remembered Yotam pulled away, beginning to scream behind the tunnel wall...

Don't think about it.

What was the cost to defend the beloved country?

Tamar stroked his hand with both of hers, running fingers around his wedding band.

"Beni," she said. "I love you. You are a good man."

But no. He couldn't think about that either. He'd done too much. He didn't want any more.

The people in the crowd were respectful of each other despite the large numbers, and the trio steadily directed to the wall at the far end. He'd seen the stone face a million times while going past the area, but had seldom been right here on the Ha'Kotel. It was impressive, old, rubbed smooth by the hands of generations of Jews with the same dream he had. His country, free, unmolested.

What must have been thousands of sheets of paper crammed the crevices between the blocks. Benjamin knew those notes were removed every six months, never read, respectfully buried in a place on the Mount of Olives. The Orthodox men with their black hats, wrapped in prayer shawls, bowed repeatedly toward the wall believing this was the closest place of God on

Earth, at least until the Third Temple was rebuilt. Benjamin didn't have that faith. No, God might be there – their survival as a separate people over thousands of years suggested that – but if so, he was distant and didn't hear the groans of his people as they were attacked from all sides.

Benjamin shoved the paper in the wall. For Yotam.

Tamar and Caleb were waiting for him twenty feet away and he rejoined them.

“Let's go,” he said. “There's nothing more we can do.”

Tamar nestled close next to him and that's when he heard the crack ring out. Tamar jumped.

It took him a moment to process what was going on.

A flower of red blossomed on her chest.

Sniper? But –

Caleb scanned the high walls around them. He took off running.

Tamar was collapsing in his arms, and he laid her gently down. No. Not Tamar.

He could see she was dying. That quick. Heart shot.

He opened her shirt to look for the entrance wound, anything, but all he saw was blood covering his hands, covering her.

“Beni,” she gasped. “I love you. Search for truth.”

No.

She fell back. He wept over her, but she was gone.