

REACHDEEP

Part 1

I Could Not Bring You Home

by Amy Deardon

amydeardon@gmail.com

copyright © 2026

All Rights Reserved

Please note that this preview consists of unpublished content from an upcoming book. Thank you for respecting the creative process and keeping these materials private.

Chapter One

Benjamin glanced back at his team. Almost there. The Black Hawk came in low and dark, and the pilot Caleb held it in a hover over a roof that would never take its weight, the rotor wash flattening the gravel below into a gray blur.

"Ninety seconds," Caleb said through the comm, flat, the way he said everything when it mattered. "I hold her here ninety seconds, then I'm light whether you're down or not. This low and this loaded, that's all she'll give me."

Benjamin keyed the mic twice — acknowledged. Below the aircraft's open door, the compound tilted up into the optics' green wash — one building, two stories, flat mudbrick over stone, a courtyard walled to twelve feet with a single gate facing the checkpoint road. He read it the way he read every location now, in exits. Gate leading outside the courtyard. Roof hatch on the building, where they were going. And bolted to the building's wall, a steel maintenance ladder running ground to roof, probably put there years ago to service the cistern. A second way out. He filed it and let it go.

The headlights from two trucks flashed a few kilometers off along the checkpoint road, already rolling. No one had needed to see the aircraft touch down; the sounds of a Black Hawk in the dark carried for miles, and there was only one thing in this sector worth coming for. They were making good time. Five minutes to the gate, maybe less if the road was dry. Benjamin grimaced. The plan had estimated a six-minute window on the sound of the rotors. Obviously

they had less.

The vibration of the helicopter absorbed all thought.

Yotam was passing his hand near his neck, and as Benjamin looked closer he saw a leather string slide over his fingers. A necklace, something around his neck.

"You don't jump wearing that!" he barked. "You strip it in the hangar. You know that."

Yotam started.

"Take it off."

"I'm sorry, Sir." Yotam started working the cord up over his head — a thin ring strung on it, plain, no shine to catch the light. He got the leather string free and closed his hand over it, hunting for somewhere to put it.

Benjamin held out his hand. "Give it here. You'll get it back when we return. It's all right." The boy was still learning, he thought, but he was definitely good enough to start running these missions. Benjamin worked the cord and ring into the webbing pouch on the cabin wall, where it would keep until they were back, and let it go.

The helicopter jerked slightly as it maneuvered into a tight space. A few moments of dark air. "We're in position," Caleb stated.

Benjamin unlatched his harness and waved for his team to do the same. "Go!" he said. "Ninety seconds."

He went first, a fast descent. The rope burned once through his gloves and then the roof came up hard under his boots, gravel and old tar. Yotam landed behind him, then Dvir, then Amit, the order they'd walked a hundred times in a hangar that smelled of jet fuel. No one spoke. Amit peeled left along the parapet to where the power feed climbed the back wall into a junction box, put his cutters to it, and the thin electric hum stopped. Benjamin hadn't noticed it until it was

gone. The whole compound went dark under them, but inside the optics, the world stayed green.

Yotam crouched at the roof hatch, working the latch. "My father said missions are cleaner on paper," he murmured, not looking up. It was the kind of thing said to steady nerves.

Benjamin nodded. "Your father knows. He's the best. He's planned many missions."

Before the flight, in the hangar, Gideon had caught his arm — not the commander's grip, but the father's — and said only, "Keep him where you can see him." Benjamin had said he would. And he planned to keep that promise.

The boy worked the latch a second longer than it needed, but then the roof hatch came up. The stairwell dropped away below them, cut straight into the thickness of the back wall — steep stone treads, no rail, the kind of stairs a mason built when stone was cheaper than caution. They went down into it single file, weapons up, the green tunnel of the optics narrowing to the next tread, and the next.

Two guards waited at the bottom, seemingly confused by the lights out. One was lit by the red glow of a cigarette in his hand. With suppressed fire Benjamin took the first, Dvir the other, two flat coughs a half-second apart. They crossed fast and eased the bodies to the floor so they wouldn't drop loud. The cigarette rolled once and went out.

The room the intel had flagged was six steps down the corridor. Benjamin cleared the corner and put his light through the doorway.

A mat. A water bowl. A length of rope, cut. He crossed and laid the back of two fingers against the mat.

Warm.

"She's been moved," he said. Somewhere in the last hour, maybe the last twenty minutes. The intel had been good enough to get them to the room, but it couldn't have known she'd be

moved out of it an hour before they came down the stairs. Now they had to find her.

He straightened. Down the corridor, past a black open doorway on the left, he saw a reinforced door at the end, barred with a beam held in latches. That might be it. But the near doorway came first — an uncleared room, a dark hole he wasn't about to walk past. He brought his weapon up and moved on it.

The scrape came from inside. Someone in there had heard something — not enough to place them, just enough to send men to the doorway. Four of them spilled into the corridor, rifles up, firing blind into a darkness the team's optics turned to gray daylight. They were shooting at a sound, at a guess; the rounds went high and wide, hammering the stone above and behind.

This was not a cell. These guards were not the disciplined network the brief had promised. Benjamin dropped the first before he could find anything to aim at, then Dvir and Amit took the other against the far wall in the strobe of their own muzzle flash.

It was over in seconds — but the incident had destroyed the quiet that was buying them time. A silent entry might have had them out with the girl before anyone on that road was sure what they'd heard. Now the whole sector knew a fight was on, and the trucks would come in fast and certain.

The report of gunfire would carry to the road. He knew that even as the last casing rang on the stone.

"Clear that room," Benjamin ordered. Yotam moved through the doorway, light sweeping the corners. "Clear," he called. "There's a window, though. Courtyard side, low."

A way in. Benjamin didn't like it.

"Seal it," he said.

Amit was already moving. He dragged one of the stacked crates across the floor and

drove it into the slot, then wedged a second on top, hard, and put his shoulder against both to test them. "No one is coming through there fast," he said.

Ahead in the corridor, Dvir put a charge on the barred door, turned his face, and blew the lock. Cautiously he pushed open the door.

The room was semi-lit with a small oil lamp in the corner, the air inside smelling dank and moldy. Along the back wall six paces in sat the hostage Yael Berkovitch in a heap. She tensed, her wrists bound in electrical tape, wound so many times it had gone gray. She was nineteen. A rabbi's daughter, the file had said, as if that told them anything. She looked small, and yet there was a core in her. She defiantly looked into the faces of the men in the doorway.

"We're here to rescue you," Amit said quickly.

They set up a perimeter as Yotam reached her. Clockwork. Benjamin watched him cut the tape at her wrists, get a hand under her arm, and bring her up, supporting her like she had been sitting too long to trust her own legs. Yotam set her against the wall, clear of the corridor's line.

"I thought no one was coming," she said. Her voice was steadier than her hands.

"Well, you weren't wrong for long," Yotam said gently.

Benjamin activated his comm link. "Caleb. We have the girl. ETA on the trucks to the gate?"

A burst of static. "They're almost there. Maybe a minute."

Benjamin winced and turned to his men. "Back the way we came. Now."

As he sorted the order in his head, Benjamin remembered his promise to Gideon, and for a moment considered keeping Yotam in his view and putting Dvir on the rear guard. The word was in his mouth. But rehearsals had identified rear on retreat was Yotam's position, and he was great on it — steady, unhurried, holding every time. There was no version of Benjamin pulling him off that wasn't both a mistake and an insult. He let it stand. It was the correct call. He would

know that for certain later, and it would not help.

"Amit, take point. Dvir, you've got her. I'm behind you."

His men moved into position to exit.

"Yotam, rear," he said, which changed nothing, because Yotam was already there.

Amit moved ahead, followed by the others. The smoke from the firefight still hung low in the corridor and made the green in the optics grain and swim. Yotam came last, weapon on the doorway they'd just come through. He did not have to be told to walk it backward. They scrabbled past the sealed room and to the staircase. Up, quickly. The girl stumbled but Dvir held her steady.

Benjamin was three treads up the stairwell, one hand steering Dvir and the girl ahead of him, when Yotam called it.

"Contact—"

The shape came fast through the smoke below — not from the window slot they'd blocked, but from the ground-floor doorway, the way the team had walked in. Someone had reached the interior another way. Yotam fired. Benjamin saw the dark shape go down. He also heard, in the same half second, the small wrong sound of something thrown, something that landed hard on stone and rolled.

"Grenade!" Yotam yelled — and then the word cut off.

The stairwell took the blast and gave it back.

The wall against Benjamin's shoulder shoved him, and then the sound arrived, and then there was grit in his mouth and a long ringing where the world had been.

He was still on his feet. Three treads above the blast point, and the three treads had been enough. He put his hand out and found stone where the stairwell continued down and found,

below that, nothing that was a stairwell anymore — a slope of broken tread and fallen ceiling, smoke pouring up through it thick enough to drown the optics.

"Yotam." He keyed the comm. "Yotam."

Static. Not silence — silence he could have argued with. Static, which was the sound of a channel with no one on the other end of it. He knew then. Yotam was dead, without a doubt, explosion and buried under stone blocks.

His combat mind arrived first, the way it always did, ahead of the rest of him and colder. It read the rubble and gave him the arithmetic without being asked. A blast in a stone throat that narrow. A body at the bottom of it. No shovel. No time. The scream he had heard cut off at its start, which was a thing he knew the meaning of from other stairwells, other doors. It set the number down in front of him and did not soften it. The window had held. The man had simply come the other way, up through the ground floor, behind them — the compound no longer theirs. They had done it right and it had not mattered. It did not care whose son it was. That part was Benjamin's to carry, and it would wait for him.

Not survivable. Not recoverable.

He did not go back down. There was no decision in it, no moment where he weighed one life against four and chose. The passage was already gone and Yotam was already gone, and the only thing left to choose was whether the rest of them died standing over a grave they couldn't dig. He turned his back on the smoke. That was the whole of it. That was the part he would carry.

"Up," he said. His voice came out level and far away.

Amit yelled through the haze. "The exit is blocked!"

The roof route had gone with the blast too — above them a support stone had shifted in its seat and dropped, and it sat across the top of the stairwell like a thing set there on purpose,

blocking the hatch. Amit put his shoulder to it. "No good."

"Keep going!" Benjamin ordered.

"Window," Amit said from ahead. Partway up the wall, a slot cut for air beckoned, wide enough. Amit went through it first and dropped, and Benjamin heard him land in the courtyard below. They put the girl through next, Dvir guiding her feet, and then Dvir, and then Benjamin folded himself into the slot and let go into open air.

The courtyard was already wrong.

They were coming through the gate now — eight, nine men, spread and low, moving with the economy the four in the corridor had not had. These knew the ground. They flowed around the rusted water tank and the stacked crates without checking, because they had been told where the cover was, which meant they had been staged for this before the team ever touched the roof. And beyond the wall, close now, brakes and doors: the checkpoint trucks, arriving to a fight already engaged.

Benjamin put the tank between his people and the gate. Rounds walked across it, punching the old steel, and water started out of the holes in thin bright ropes.

"Ladder," he said. "Amit, Dvir, get her climbing. I've got the base."

The ladder — the one he'd filed away and thought he wouldn't need — ran up the courtyard wall to the roof, and the roof was where Caleb had to be. Benjamin took a knee at its foot and put fire back through the gate, short and disciplined, buying the wall one man at a time. Above him Dvir got Yael onto the rungs and went up under her, his body between her and the courtyard. Amit followed.

"Caleb." Benjamin held the trigger between words. "Roof. Now."

"Coming down," Caleb said, and then the sound of the aircraft dropped over the wall and

filled the whole courtyard. The Black Hawk settled into a low hover above the roof, wheels almost skimming the gravel, and the roof lit under its lights. Benjamin heard rounds finding the fuselage, that flat tin knock, and heard Caleb say nothing about it at all.

He came up the ladder to the roof last. He did not remember most of that escape afterward — only the ladder rungs cold through his gloves and the wall shaking against his knuckles when something struck it low, and then the roof under him. He crossed to the aircraft, caught the frame of the open door, and Amit's hands closed on his belt and dragged him up into the cabin.

Dvir had Yael already inside. Caleb held the hover three seconds longer than the fire wanted him to, and then they were up and off the stone and out over the wall. The tracer came after them in long slow arcs and found the place where they had been a moment before.

No one spoke on the way to the secure site. Yael sat with Dvir's jacket around her shoulders and her cut wrists turned up in her lap. Benjamin looked at the floor of the aircraft between his boots. Somewhere under the ringing that had not left his ears, he was still standing three treads up in a stone throat full of smoke, listening to a channel with no one on it, and hearing under that a man's voice in a hangar. *Keep him where you can see him.*

The flight seemed to go forever, dark.

Forever dark.

Finally they reached the perimeter of the base. Caleb set the Black Hawk down on the pad and wound the engines down. Quiet came in like water.

Caleb unbuckled his harness and pulled his helmet off. He twisted around in the seat. "What happened?"

Benjamin met his eyes. "Grenade. Yotam held that exit." His voice was wrong at the

ReachDeep
Part 1: I Could Not Bring You Home

edges. "He put himself on it so we'd get out. He held it."

Caleb said nothing. There was nothing to add that would be true and bearable at the same time.

The comm crackled. It was Command, dry and procedural, a voice that had been sitting in a warm room the whole night.

"Package secure?"

Benjamin keyed the mic. He looked at Yael, alive, her wrists in her lap.

"Package secure," he said. "One man lost."

He let go of the mic. Outside, medics were already crossing the pad toward the door, and he made himself stand to meet them. There was a girl to hand over. There was a report to make.

But first he reached into the webbing pouch on the cabin wall and drew out the ring on its cord. He held it up in the dim cabin light, turning it once, this plain small thing Yotam had handed him without a word an hour ago and could not take back now. It was coming home in Benjamin's fist, and there was no body to bring home beside it.

Somewhere across the base a man had taken his arm in a hangar and asked him for one thing only, to keep an eye on his son. Benjamin closed his hand around the ring until the cord bit his palm. He had told Yotam he would get it back at the pad. Instead Benjamin would carry it to Gideon, and stand in front of the man, and find something to say.

He had no idea yet what that would be. He only knew there was no putting it off. Before this night was over, he would have to face Gideon.

Chapter Two

There was no harder thing a soldier could be handed than what Benjamin carried into that office. Yotam's father would hear it from him, tonight.

Benjamin stood at the opened door and knocked.

Gideon was on his feet beside the desk, staring at the wall showing his framed certificates and medals and awards. In the corner, a faded photo showed ten or so men in fatigues squinting in the desert sun. This was the summary of what Gideon had achieved in the past thirty years of life. Nothing else.

The desk lamp was the only light, a small yellow pool that cast shadows into the corners. On the blotter lay the casualty folder, squared to the edge of the desk, its flap still shut an hour after it had been created.

Gideon turned when he heard the knock. "Come!"

Benjamin walked two paces inside, to the edge of the desk. "Sir."

"They cleared you," Gideon said.

"A few minutes ago. I came straight here."

"You didn't have to come tonight. I know you're tired. Notification's been made." He kept his sentences short, the way a man does when the short ones are all he can lift. "Say it and go home, Major. Just give me the shape of it. Let the rest live in the report."

Benjamin knew the report would say *one KIA, remains unrecovered*. He would not hand

that to him.

He'd been in Gideon's office a few times before. He noticed suddenly that the framed photograph of Gideon and Yotam when Yotam graduated to special forces was missing. No, not missing. Face-down on the bookshelf.

"I just wanted you to hear it directly from me," he said. "Coming out, Yotam held the rear. It was his position when we trained and he was the right man for it. A shooter came in behind us on the stairs. Yotam put him down and didn't move off the line. If he'd moved, the man would have had all of us from behind." He let that stand a moment. "The girl's alive because of him. All of us."

Gideon said nothing.

"Before the man went down, he tossed a grenade. Yotam dived on top of it to protect us. The stairwell —"

"I don't need the sequence."

"— took the blast between us —"

"I don't need the sequence." Gideon turned his back and faced the wall showing the length and breadth of his military life. After a few moments he took a breath.

"Where is he?" Gideon still faced the wall, and his voice dropped. "Where's my son?"

Benjamin grimaced. He wished he didn't have to continue.

"The blast brought the stairwell down on him. Heavy broken stones on top of him. For us there was no way down — the passage was gone. Yotam was dead, had to be with the explosion and being buried like that. And we had no time to dig because a second force of eight men was already in the courtyard. We had a lead of maybe thirty seconds." Benjamin held his voice flat because flat was the only thing that would carry it whole.

"I checked the channel twice. Nothing from Yotam came back, nothing but static. He was

gone before the dust settled, Sir — you are hearing this from me, not from a report. I was there a few feet away. It was instant. It was certain." The last of it had no mercy in it and he said it anyway. "I couldn't bring him out."

He did not defend the order. Gideon hadn't asked him to, and a man didn't have to explain a right call to the commander who'd know it without a word.

Gideon spoke in a pinched voice. "Yotam's — body — "

"I gave the order to break contact and go. We couldn't retrieve him —"

His back to him, Gideon violently raised his fist to his shoulder.

Benjamin froze as if a blanket had fallen over him. *Halt*. His body reacted before his mind had even processed the signal. Everything behind that hand had to stop, hold, come no further. He realized this was the only way for Gideon to stop more knowledge, the only way he had left. The silence in the room fell like a pall, surrounding that raised fist.

Benjamin waited. After a minute, or maybe two, Gideon opened his fist. Then he lowered his arm.

"Sir," Benjamin said softly, but Gideon just shook his head. It was too much, and Benjamin regretted he had to continue.

"There's one more thing."

A heartbeat.

"After wheels up from here, on our way to the site, Yotam was wearing a cord around his neck with a ring on it. I took it from him and stored it. Now it belongs with you."

He took a step forward and put the cord and ring on top of the desk. It made a small clunk as it touched the surface.

Gideon seemed to shrink just a moment, and then he turned around. Looked at the ring.

He did not pick it up. Whatever crossed his face was gone before it finished, and his hands stayed at his sides. Then he lifted his eyes, and his voice came back flat and even.

"Go home, Shalev." Gideon held his eyes a beat past the words. "Go home to Tamar. Tonight you still can."

Benjamin heard a blessing in it. It was the kindest thing anyone had said to him since the roof.

He studied Gideon a moment before turning and walking out the door.

#

A long time after Benjamin left, Gideon picked up the ring.

This was Miriam's ring. He had strung it on the cord himself the year her hands went too thin for it, and hung it on the boy the day they buried her. The boy grew up to become a man, and yet he still wore the ring.

Miriam rested under a stone he could stand over. But his son was now under a stairwell in a country that wasn't his, with nothing over him and no ground that was Gideon's to claim for him.

He turned the ring once in his fingers. He'd told Benjamin no one would fault him. He'd meant it. He'd run thirty years of operations, in the field and in the room, and he knew a closing window when he heard one described.

And yet —

He crossed to the wall and studied it again. The citations. The commissions. The straight lines of it. Thirty years, and he had never once left anyone behind. Not a man. Not a body. Not even a dog tag or a name in foreign dirt with nothing to stand over. It was all there on the wall, the one promise he had always kept.

Benjamin had not kept that tradition.

Gideon knew that he was going home to a lit window and a wife who would put her hand to his face and welcome him home.

He closed his fist around the ring until the cord bit. This was all he had left.

He set it on the desk, squared it beside the folder he had not opened, and turned off the lamp. Gideon stood in the darkness for a long time.

#

The Valley of Ghosts. A fitting location for today, Benjamin thought. Tamar had probably chosen the restaurant in the German quarter of Emek Refaim because she believed the familiar place might quiet his thoughts.

It was late afternoon, two days since the mission.

The afternoon sun washed over the old Jerusalem stone that glowed a pale gold in the fading light. The street moved with its usual rhythm, indifferent to private sorrow. Families lingered outside cafés, children darted between tables, and friends paused in easy conversation beneath the shade of the trees. Life continued with effortless confidence, as though nothing irrevocable had happened.

Benjamin rested his hand on Tamar's back for a moment, and she smiled at him. Caleb beside him nodded as if to say, it'll be all right.

They walked without speaking. Their footsteps blended with the murmur of traffic and the low hum of voices drifting from open terraces beneath striped awnings. The aroma of coffee mingled with warm bread, grilled vegetables, garlic, and spices carried on the evening air.

Ordinarily the smells would have stirred his appetite. Today not so much.

"Here we are," Tamar said. "You always love it here."

Caleb laughed. "You know us too well."

A handwritten menu rested beside the entrance, its chalk lettering listing familiar comfort dishes—fresh salads, grilled fish, shakshuka, warm breads, and the day's specials. It struck him that the menu had probably changed several times less than two days since Yotam died. The world simply kept rewriting itself. Life went on. Through the broad windows of the restaurant, people leaned toward one another over shared meals.

"You two need food that didn't come out of a briefing room," she said. "I won't be happy until you both eat a proper dinner."

Benjamin smiled weakly.

For a long moment he scanned the room, then led Tamar and Caleb to a table at the far corner and sat with his back to the wall. Caleb took the facing wall without a word. Tamar brushed his shoulder with her hand as she sat beside him. The place was warm and close, smelling of charcoal and lemon and someone's cigarette smoke drifting in from the pavement outside. Above the bar, a television murmured the evening news to no one. He picked up the laminated plastic menu even though he already knew it by heart.

"I love this place," Caleb said.

"You come every time."

"For the company."

"For the lamb."

Tamar slipped the menu from Benjamin's hands. "We already know what we want, eh, Beni? Shall we start with the roasted cauliflower and tahini?"

He breathed deeply. He was glad she'd brought them here. The chatter around them, the anonymity, the familiar rituals of ordering and waiting — it all began, slowly, to ease something inside him.

They ordered grilled sea bass and vegetables, kababs and rice, and shared plates for the table. It was all delicious and reassuringly ordinary. Tamar reached across and stole food from Benjamin's plate without asking. He watched her do it and felt something loosen in his chest. He had been holding on too tightly ever since the roof.

"I wonder if he ever came here," Caleb said.

Benjamin didn't have to ask who.

Tamar didn't rush to fill the silence. She let it sit until it became bearable, then reached over for a piece of bread from Caleb's plate. Caleb caught her wrist before she got there. They all laughed.

The ordinary mock-theft of it helped Benjamin breathe again.

"I only met Yotam once," she said. "I liked him. He was serious, though. Quiet."

"He was good," Benjamin said. "He had a lot of talent and good sense. I think he would have grown into one of the greats if only —"

Caleb nodded. "I think his father must be proud of him."

"His father has no one now," Benjamin said quietly. "You should have seen Gideon when I reported to him after the mission. He just stood there looking at the wall. He couldn't say anything."

There was a chair no one had pulled out, at the fourth side of the table, and no one named it. Benjamin was grateful for that too.

Later, when the plates were down to bones and rind and streaks of olive oil, Tamar said,

"You should write his name."

Benjamin looked up.

"For the Wall." She chased the last of the oil on her plate with a crust, saying it as casually as she said things she'd already decided were true. "Write it on a slip and put it in the stones. It's what the notes are for. A place to set something down when you can't keep holding it."

"That's for other people."

"It's for anyone carrying something they can't carry." She looked at him then, straight on, in the way that had undone him at twenty-six and had not stopped even eight years later. "You've had it in your jaw all night, Beni. I can see it from here."

He didn't answer, which with Tamar was the same as agreeing.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"Good. Then you'll do it." She put her hands into her lap. She saw it anyway. She always did.

He found himself turning the idea over. He hated how much he suspected it might help.

The waiter came over and cleared the plates. They ordered cappuccinos.

Benjamin first noticed the man across the room before the coffee arrived. He was about thirty. Fit but didn't look military. Button-down shirt. Jeans. Tzitzit fringes under the shirt. Knitted kippah. No obvious holster.

The man wasn't doing anything overtly suspicious, but something wasn't quite right. He had stopped three tables away, pretending to study the dessert case while looking in their direction a beat too long. Then he looked away. Then back again. His shoulders were tight, his hands uncertain, as though he had already changed his mind several times.

The hesitation was what caught his attention.

People who knew where they were going simply walked. People with bad intentions

often overcommitted. This man hovered in the uncomfortable space between, gathering nerve.

Instinct quietly rearranged the room. Distances. Exits. The weight of the heavy water bottle within reach. The narrow aisle the man would have to cross.

Benjamin nudged Caleb and jutted his chin ever so slightly toward the man. Caleb looked once and returned his gaze to the table. Benjamin knew he'd seen the same thing.

The waiter returned and set three cappuccinos on the table. The rich aroma of espresso drifted upward with the curling steam.

Tamar reached for her cup then glanced at Benjamin and froze, sensing something was going on.

By the time the stranger finally took a tentative step toward their table, Benjamin had already angled his chair half an inch, opening his line of sight while keeping his expression relaxed. Conversations from other tables, Hebrew and English and French, chattered around them.

The man stopped a pace short of their table. "Caleb Mendel. I thought that was you." A small, careful pause. "I'm Noah Barak. From Herzliya — we were at school together. You won't—"

"Noah." Caleb blinked, and Benjamin watched him travel fifteen years in a second and land on it. "Wow. Yeah. Noah."

Benjamin watched Caleb's eyes narrow in concentration, then soften with recognition. The stranger's shoulders eased. Whatever he'd been rehearsing by the dessert case, it wasn't an attack.

Benjamin let the room widen again. The water bottle became a water bottle again. The exits slipped back into the background. He reached for his cappuccino as Caleb pushed back his chair with the surprised nod of someone opening a door he'd forgotten existed.

Noah paused a moment, awkward. "It's been a while."

"It has." Something moved under Caleb's easiness, there and gone; Benjamin filed it

without yet knowing what it was.

"I won't take your evening," Noah said. "I saw you from the counter, and I've been wanting to say something to you for a long time. I never thought I'd have the chance."

He took a breath. "I just wanted to tell you, Caleb, I really regret how I treated you back then in school. I was a lot worse than I understood at the time. I wish I hadn't been that person. I'm sorry for everything I did to you."

He gave a small shrug. "That's all — you don't have to do anything with that."

"It was a long time ago," Caleb said, which was not the same as *it's fine*.

"It was." Noah nodded. "I think about it though, even now."

The silence stretched. Caleb fidgeted. "What are you doing now?" he finally asked, because the silence needed somewhere to go.

Noah shuffled on his feet. "I'm a history teacher now. High school."

Benjamin saw Caleb was genuinely amused.

"I know," Noah said. "Life's strange."

The silence continued to stretch.

"I'm married. Two kids." Noah's mouth tugged. "And I became a believer a few years back. Long story. It changed everything."

Benjamin sat forward. Believer. The word clicked quietly into place in his mind. Not judgement, but classification. Years of training had taught him that every new piece of information belonged somewhere.

Noah glanced around the restaurant. "That's the whole of it. It's good to see you, Caleb."

He nodded to Tamar, and then to Benjamin. The nod to Benjamin was different by a fraction — a man who had noticed the wall seat and the watchfulness. The tiny adjustment of the

chair. And then he was gone.

For a moment none of them said anything. At the next table, someone laughed loudly within a conversation.

"Noah Barak," Tamar said. "Isn't he the one who —"

Caleb clipped a laugh. "Put me in lockers. Beat me up with his gang. Three years of it." Caleb was watching the counter. "He broke my wrist once. Told the teachers I fell."

Benjamin reached for his cup and took a sip.

"Noah looked me in the eye just now. He never did that, back then. Not once."

Benjamin drank his coffee and said nothing. Tamar was watching Caleb over the rim of her own cup.

"Let's wrap up," she said. "Neither of you is any good sitting still."

They finished. They paid. Outside, the evening had gone soft and purple with sunset and the street was full of people walking nowhere in particular. Tamar slipped her arm through Benjamin's, and stayed close. Caleb walked beside her on the other side, looking as if he was reading the street out of habit. Once he glanced back at the lit window of the restaurant as though he'd left something in it.

"Write the note," Tamar said. "Yotam."

"I will," Benjamin said, and for the length of the walk home, with her arm through his and the city ordinary around them, he almost felt like a man who could.

Chapter Three

The plaza in front of HaKotel, the Wailing Wall, was too full for what he had come to do.

Benjamin kept Tamar's arm through his and let the crowd move them toward the Wall. His other hand stayed closed around the note in his pocket, folded twice, the paper gone soft from being carried. He had written it at the kitchen table before light and had not read it since. He did not need to. Two lines. He knew them the way he knew the weight of his own sidearm.

Caleb walked a half step behind, on Tamar's other side, and his eyes did not stop moving.

"You're doing it again, Beni," Tamar said without looking at him.

"Doing what?"

"Counting."

He was. He had been since the checkpoint. The plaza read to him the way every place did, in exits and angles and the height of the buildings that shouldered up around the open ground. Two police barriers set at a lazy diagonal, a gap between them wide enough for a stroller, or for a crowd to push through in a hurry. Officers in pairs, some watching the stones and some watching the crowd, and the two jobs pulling them different ways. Balconies above the southern arcade. A camera on a pole that swept slow and stupid over the same forty degrees.

He filed it and let it go. He had not come here to work.

"I came to leave the note," he said. "That's all."

"I know." Tamar pressed her arm tighter against his side. "That's all it has to be."

The Wall stood ahead of them, past the men in dark coats and hats who bowed in and out of prayer as if the crowd were not there. Folded slips of paper crowded into every seam of the stone. He had passed this place a hundred times in a vehicle, in a briefing, as a line on a map. He had rarely stood inside and close enough to touch it. He was not a man who prayed. His grandfather had prayed. Benjamin had inherited the country and the language and the ache of a faith he'd also inherited without the words for it. He had made his peace with that a long time ago.

Off to the right, past a knot of tourists, a young man had climbed onto a low stone bench. He wore a knitted kippah and had the loud, careful bearing of someone who had rehearsed. A small crowd had gathered to argue with him rather than to listen.

"—the altar is finished," the young man called out. "The blood has already been given."

A man in a black coat turned on him and shouted something Benjamin did not catch. Another joined it. The words knocked back and forth over the young man's head, and he lifted his chin and let them come, as if the anger proved him right. Two officers drifted toward the bench, not fast, gauging it.

Benjamin felt the crowd tighten around the disturbance the way water tightens around a stone.

"Not here," he said.

"He isn't doing anything to us," Tamar said.

"He's doing it to the whole plaza." He steered her a half step wide of the pull of it. "We do this and we go."

"Then let's do it." She looked up at him, straight on, the way she had looked at him when they had just met and she had not learned yet to look away. She still didn't look away, not when it mattered. "Don't let him take Yotam from you too. Leave the note. That's the reason we're here."

Caleb came up close on her shoulder. "She's right. And Gideon knows we planned to come before noon — I told him. If we're doing it, sooner's better than a crowd this size getting bigger."

Benjamin looked at him. "You told Gideon?"

"I told him you were putting something in the Wall for Yotam. I thought the man should know." Caleb's gaze went back to the roofline out of habit. "That's all I told him."

There was nothing wrong in it. Another fact. Benjamin let it go.

They reached the stones in a press of shoulders and low voices. Up close the Wall was not a symbol. It was enormous weathered blocks of ancient stone, shadow deep in the seams, and paper everywhere, thousands of personal wants folded small enough to fit. So many names. So many things people could not carry alone and had come here to set down against rock that would outlast all of them.

Benjamin took the note out and unfolded it once, to be sure of it.

Yotam Gideon.

I could not bring you home.

There should have been more. A commander should know how to write to a dead soldier, should be able to find the sentence that stood in the place of a body that had not come back. He had tried, at the table, in the dark. Everything longer than the two lines had been a lie of some kind — an explanation, a defense, a request for something he had no right to ask. The two lines were the only part that was true.

He stepped in close to the stone, found a seam at the height of his chest, and worked the paper into it until it held. The block was warm from the sun and rougher than he expected against his knuckles. He kept his hand there a moment after the note was in. There was nothing to say.

He did not try to make something up.

Then he stepped back.

Tamar was waiting a few feet off, clear of the tightest press, with Caleb beside her. Her face changed when she saw him — a small softening, permission to walk away, love and sympathy in her eyes.

"That's all I can do for him now," Benjamin said.

"It's enough." She put her hand flat on his chest, over the sternum, the way she did when she wanted him to slow down and be a person for a minute. "You did a hard thing. Now the rest." Her thumb moved once against his shirt. "Truth first, Beni. Even when it costs. Especially then. Promise me you'll keep looking for what's actually there."

"I promise," he said, because it was easy to promise and because she wanted it. And he bent and kissed her once, quick, too hard for the crowd.

She nodded. "Search for truth."

Tamar suddenly stiffened against him. At the same time he heard a loud crack from high on the southern side.

For half a second his mind gave him nothing but the sound and the wrongness of it, a flat hard report that did not belong to the plaza. Then Tamar's weight changed against him. Her hand slid off his chest. He caught her as she went down, one arm behind her back, and eased her to the ground because her legs had stopped being hers.

A dark bloom opened across the front of her blouse, high on the left, over the heart.

His hands were already at her collar, pulling it open to find the wound, to put a thumb in it, to do the thing his hands knew how to do. There was too much blood too fast. His combat mind arrived ahead of the rest of him, cold, the way it always came, and read the entry and the color and

the place of it and set the number down without mercy. High chest. Left. Deep. Not survivable. He pressed both hands down over it anyway. He had pressed wounds like this on dirt roads and in stone rooms under red light. He had never once done it to Tamar, who belonged in a kitchen full of evening light, who stole food off his plate to playfully tease him and make him smile, who grounded him, who had made him come here so he could set one thing down to ease a burden.

Above him Caleb's head had already snapped up and back, toward the top of the southern arcade, reading a line Benjamin had not seen.

"Rooftop!" Caleb shouted. "High — south side!" And he was gone, driving through the crowd toward the arcade stairs.

The plaza came apart around them. Someone screamed. Then the words started, the way they always did, people naming the thing before anyone could know it — *Shooter — shooter — believer, it's the believer* — and the whole weight of the crowd turned as one animal toward the young man on the bench, hands reaching for him, and the two officers who had been drifting his way now ran to pull him down under a pile of bodies. The nearest security moved toward the shouting, toward the visible thing, away from the empty roofline where Caleb was already climbing.

Benjamin knelt in the middle of it and pressed both hands to Tamar's chest to stop the bleeding and did not look up.

"Tamar. Look at me." His voice came out flat and far away, the command voice, the only one that would hold.

But she was already dead. He knew it.

Heart shot. Gone.

He kept pressing anyway, even knowing there was nothing under his hands to save. His hands were covered with blood. From somewhere past his fog came radios and running feet and

prayer turned to panic, and over his shoulder they had the young man from the bench face-down on the stones now, a knee in his back, dragging him up, dragging him away.

Caleb had called the roof. The man on the bench had not fired — Benjamin knew that the way he knew the two written lines he had folded into the Wall. And still, with Tamar's last words not yet cooled in his ears, some older thing in him turned away from the empty roofline and toward the shouting, toward the crowd that had already chosen its word and was chanting it up into the cameras. *Believer*. His grief reached for the nearer of the two things and closed its fist. He did not decide it. It arrived the way the arithmetic always arrived, ahead of him and colder, and it did not care yet how wrong it was.

Search for truth, she had told him. The plaza screamed the other thing across the top of it.

Caleb came back through the thinning crowd at a run, chest heaving, hands empty. He stopped short when he saw them and Benjamin watched the last of his hope go out of him.

"Gone," Caleb said. "Roof door open. Powder burns on the ground. Nothing else." He looked at Tamar and stopped talking.

Benjamin did not answer. He gathered her up off the stones and held her against him, her blood smearing against him, her head against his shoulder where it belonged, and above him the seam in the Wall still held the note he had come to leave.

Yotam Gideon.

I could not bring you home.

He had written that for a boy under a stairwell in a country that was not his, with no ground anyone could stand over.

Now Tamar was in his arms, warm still, and there was no possible way he could bring her home either.