

# **One Woman Crusade**

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# I.

Yuri Vladishkin ran as fast as his old legs would carry him, continually bumping into people barring his way. He must reach the Wailing Wall! The square there was always crammed with hundreds of pilgrims on Saturdays – he'd surely then have a decent chance of evading them.

"Careful!" He was treated to a hearty shove. Stumbling, he fell to one knee. He stood up – his grimace indicating the pain he was in – and quickly felt to see if the little black canister was still safe in his trouser pocket, before limping off as fast as he could. Glancing over this shoulder his eye caught a movement in the crowd. His pursuers were catching up!

He limped desperately on. Almost there – the square was just ahead! Then his luck ran out. The way was barred by one of the men, smack before the square. The man made to grab him by the collar, but missed. Yuri's painful knee stopped all play though. There was just no escape. Throwing his arm around Yuri's neck, the thug yanked him close to his side. Yuri struggled, trying hard to avoid the man's other hand which was roughly patting him down.

"What's going on here?" An Israeli soldier appeared as if from nowhere. He raised his rifle and the nearest huddle of onlookers stepped quickly back, creating space between them and the soldier. Without releasing his grip, the heavily built man holding tight to Yuri, answered the soldier.

"I'm trying to retrieve what this pickpocket stole from me. It's the third time in a fortnight I've been robbed."

Yuri figured the game was up. He struggled to free himself one last time. Simultaneously worming the little black canister out of his pocket, he dropped it surreptitiously to the ground. In the ensuing scuffle, he managed to give it a little flick with his toe, and it rolled towards the shallow guttering along the edge of the square. He was the only one to see it land next to a discarded, empty cola can.

"Explain yourself!" snapped the soldier, clearly at a loss what to do next.

He was joined by another couple of soldiers and told them what was going on. Yuri felt his jailer beginning to lose confidence but two more men joined him just then, and the three huddled together conspiratorially. Yuri of course recognised them from earlier, and the one in glasses truly gave him the creeps. In truth, he scared the living daylight out of him.

"May I suggest he empty his pockets and return the stolen film canister to my friend here," said the bespectacled man. "We won't press any charges." It was a reasonable attempt at calming the situation.

"Film canister?"

"Yes. Perhaps he thought it contained money? Who knows what goes through the mind of a pickpocket!"

The soldier who was obviously in charge, turned to Yuri and ordered him to empty his pockets forthwith. Pilgrims around the square had watched with interest for a little while, but now turned away... nothing to see here. Everyone went about their business. Yuri had remained silent all this time. He tried to keep his eye on the little canister but lost sight of it, what with everyone on the square milling about. Slowly, he emptied his pockets, but he had nothing in there except a couple of bank notes and some change.

"Name!" barked one of the soldiers.

Yuri straightened up and proudly said, "My name is Professor Yuri Vladishkin, Lecturer at the University of Moscow."

"What are you doing here?"

"I am a tourist and really don't understand what I'm supposed to have done wrong. This man obviously mistakes me for someone else." He tried to wriggle free once more, but the man detaining him was very persistent.

"Release him," said the soldier to the man holding Yuri.

Yuri's attacker glanced questioningly at the man in the glasses. Irritated at his hesitation, the soldier raised his rifle again. "I said, let him go!"

Finally released, Yuri sidled off to where he'd last seen the film canister. The cola can was still there, but the little canister was nowhere to be seen! Looking desperately around, he saw that the soldiers were still detaining the men. That surely wouldn't be for much longer. He took off as fast as his painful knee allowed. Losing the roll of film worried him to distraction. His only solace was that whoever had picked it up could surely have no idea of the veritable revolution the photos on there could actually cause.

He hurried along the narrow streets of old Jerusalem. No way was he going back to his hotel – those men would perhaps know, or at least could find out, where he was staying, just outside the old city walls. Thank goodness he had left his passport and flight ticket with his friend Moshe, as there had been no safe in the hotel room. His bag with his few odds and ends was no reason to return there either. He could do without all of it.

It was already dark when he reached Moshe Yaresz' simple dwelling. He banged the heavy, wooden door loudly with the knocker a couple of times and waited

impatiently for the door to open even just a crack. Anxious to be off the street, he pushed his way into the dimly lit hallway, immediately closing the door behind himself.

“Yuri?”

“Moshe, I need your help!”

“Please, come right in, won’t you.” They entered a small, sparsely furnished room. Yuri sank gratefully down onto the couch with a trembling sigh and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Let me put the kettle on and bring you a bite to eat, then you can tell me all about it. You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“If only it was just a ghost,” mumbled Yuri, but Moshe had already disappeared into the kitchen.

What a state of affairs. If someone had told him just six months ago that he’d soon be in Jerusalem and in fear of his life, he would surely have guffawed and poo-pooed the very idea. And if that same person had told him that he would be privy to a huge secret, that could seriously embarrass the Roman Catholic church, and perhaps even cause a schism in that same church? Surely he’d have walked away, shaking ‘no, no, no’. Yet that was just exactly what had happened.

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As one of the world’s leading, most respected archaeologists, Yuri Vladishkin had become involved in a dig near the Dead Sea just over six months ago. The Israelis had recently started a building project there, intended to prevent the Dead Sea from draining, and had stumbled upon the remains of old buildings. The proper kind of investigators were given three months to examine and research everything before the building project was to recommence. As a famous, yet independent archaeologist, Vladishkin was given the opportunity to lead the dig. Unfortunately, it had all proved rather disappointing, although they had managed to dig out an old convent containing, as far as they could ascertain, twelve human skeletons. Although the archaeology team had tried their damndest to get the Israeli authorities to spare the dig for longer, the answer had been a resounding ‘no!’ which had more or less terminated his further involvement.

During the length of the dig, he had become friends with Moshe Yaresz, a retired Mossad employee he’d met one day in a little café in old Jerusalem. Over just the previous few days, they’d spent a lot of time together. Today though, as he was due to fly home to Moscow tomorrow, he had wanted to buy some souvenirs and had already been out and about in the narrow streets of old Jerusa-

lem since early morning. He had come to rather like this old city and was happy to spend hours rummaging around in all sorts of little shops, seeking something decent among the generic rubbish, loudly prized as 'genuine' and 'original'. He had already cheerfully waved off several charlatans until...

"Dead Sea Scrolls!" He turned around, a smile on his face. The tubular leather receptacle held on high by the unshaven Arab shopkeeper could hardly pass for 2,000 years old.

"This leather case is never old enough," he said. He already knew the Arab slightly, having previously purchased a few little items in this very shop. Yuri made to return the long tube he'd been examining, but the shopkeeper persisted.

"Open it professor, see with your own eyes that I do not lie."

"No, you're all right." He knew if he did open it, there would be endless haggling over the price of the contents and he really didn't want to spend any amount of cash on rubbish.

"Only four hundred shekels." Well, that was a ludicrous and conspicuously high price, which actually made him curious after all, and it stopped him in his tracks. Studying the case more carefully he could see that the top end was closed with a zip, of all things. Unzipping it, he peered in and could just make out some yellowed rolls of what appeared to be paper and not much else. With thumb and forefinger, he tried to pull out one of the papers, only succeeding in breaking off a piece. Upon closer examination, he immediately knew that it wasn't paper after all. It was papyrus. His heart started to beat ever so slightly faster. Of course it wasn't any Dead Sea Scrolls... but it could certainly be something of some age.

"Okay, I'll buy it, although the price is scandalously high, and I only have 200 shekels on me." The shopkeeper was clearly not satisfied at that, but nodded his acquiescence.

"That will do for now. I trust you to bring the rest later. You go now." Somewhat confounded, Yuri handed two crumpled bank notes from his pocket to the shopkeeper, who immediately secreted them about his person.

"Leave. You go now," repeated the shopkeeper, and, without a by-your-leave, the Arab more or less shoved him out of his shop and locked the door directly behind him.

In a bit of a daze, Yuri walked back to his hotel with the leather art portfolio under his arm. Once in his room, he tried to pull the scrolls from the tube. Having no luck at all, he used his penknife to slice into it. It contained a letter, written in Hebrew, plus two papyrus scrolls rolled together. He carefully unrolled

the first turn of the scrolls, and could see that they were written in Aramaic – not a language he mastered, although he was able to decipher some words here and there. Then, holding the letter, he began to translate the Hebrew in which he was reasonably proficient.

He read it repeatedly. Each perusal had him staring aghast at the letter for minutes on end and shaking his head, *this can't be!* His first coherent thoughts were, *this must all be destroyed! My God, if this got out!* Nothing short of destruction could prevent a veritable cultural revolution! Simultaneously, he knew *he* neither would nor could do such a radical thing.

“Perhaps it’s all just a really bad joke,” he mumbled to himself. “Oh, but what if it’s not?”

The letter writer’s hand was very neat, elegant even. The narrative itself was obviously incomplete, stopping all too abruptly. He put his penknife to work again and cut the portfolio tube entirely open and found just what he was looking for, right at the bottom. A black plastic film canister had been stuck right in there too. He held it gingerly, took off the lid and shook out the roll of film.

Totally entranced, Yuri could only stare. Of course it must be a joke... but if this was real... oh, he would have to be really, really careful! How did this get to the shop and why had the shopkeeper sold it to him so cheaply? Perhaps the man didn’t really know what had been in the case... or did he indeed know and want rid of it at any price? He had to go back to that shop and persuade the shopkeeper to tell him where it had come from. Going back there needn’t be too suspicious – he still owed the man 200 shekels after all. He didn’t much like the idea of leaving the two rolls of papyrus in his rather insecure old hotel room. He instinctively knew he had to make the scrolls safe before going anywhere.

He replaced the papyrus scrolls in the tubular case and taped everything tightly back together. He then took an old newspaper and wrapped it all up into a neat parcel. On impulse, he addressed it to himself at the State University of Moscow where he had tenure, and where he was sure it would be perfectly safe until such time as he came to collect it. Better than his home address too. He then left the hotel, found a nearby post office, and sent the parcel off, recorded delivery. He popped the receipt safely into his money belt.

It was already late afternoon when he arrived back at the shop where he had bought the receptacle. He didn’t go in right away, deciding to have a drink in the tea house opposite so he could watch and see if the shopkeeper perhaps sold more of these leather tubes. Sitting with a super-sweet yet strong tea, he observed the little shop as casually as he could. At first, nothing untoward hap-

pened at all. Every so often, a tourist would enter and small items were bought. Nobody left with a leather tube, or anything resembling one. Yuri threw some change from his pocket on the sticky table with way too many flies on it. As he rose to leave, his attention was drawn to three men approaching the shop. They looked rather incongruous and two of them were surely... Russian? The third man was fairly short, sporting rimless glasses, and clearly a westerner. One of the men, built like a tank, stood outside while the other two entered the shop. Yuri sat back down and ordered a glass of water from the waiter who was vainly attempting to shoo the flies away. The little card on the shop door saying 'Open' was turned to read 'Closed', and the door curtain was pulled across. Something was clearly not quite kosher here, and Yuri thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't just gone in to the shop.

The two men came out again before too long with no sign of having bought anything. The guy with the specs addressed the other two, obviously instructing them. The hair at the back of Yuri's neck was all on end. Could this all actually be to do with the tube he'd bought? Maybe the shopkeeper had told them *he* had it now, and what he looked like! The thought seriously frightened him. He had to get out of there, just not before those men had left. He nervously crept to what served as a toilet and upon his return, the men had left, no longer standing in front of the shop that still read 'Closed'.

Leaving the café, he could only think of one thing. *I have to get out of here!* He had to get back to the hotel as quickly as he could, pack his things and leave the country. Walking as fast as he could up the narrow lanes and streets, he headed to the Jaffa Gate. To his dismay, he immediately spotted the bespectacled man and one of his thugs standing near the gate, watching everyone that passed through. He hesitated, staring right at them. Suddenly, the big guy turned and looked straight at him. He spoke to rimless glasses guy who also turned in his direction. Yuri panicked, turned on his heels and ran back into the old city. It was there he had been caught by the third man, on the square.

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Moshe Yaresz came back through with a tray of bread, cheese and olives and laid it all on the table.

"Sorry to have taken so long, Yuri, I didn't have one bite of cheese in the house." He dashed back into the kitchen to get the teapot, then poured for both of them. He added a big spoonful of honey to each mug and handed Yuri his. "Now, what's going on? You know I'm good at fixing things," he chuckled.

"I... I was being chased by these men! I don't know why... perhaps they mistook me for someone else. They caught up with me on the square by the Wailing Wall. I managed to get away."

Moshe looked at him questioningly. His years of experience in Mossad told him his friend was keeping something from him but sure, that was his prerogative.

"Surely some misunderstanding? You were right to come here though. If you like, I'll walk you back to your hotel later."

Yuri almost choked on his tea, coughing until his eyes watered.

"No, not at all," he managed, once he got his breath back. He checked his watch. "Actually, I need to go now, may I have my ticket and my passport, please?"

"Sure," said Moshe, retrieving them right away. "Are you certain I can't help you in any way? It's really not a problem to walk you to your hotel."

"No, that's not necessary." Yuri walked to the door, passport and ticket in hand, and opened it just a crack. "Nobody there!" he said, forcing a smile. "I'll come say goodbye tomorrow before I leave, okay?"

Before Moshe could even answer, his friend was gone. *Hmmm, strange*, he thought. *Yuri hadn't even touched his bread and olives, and he usually made short work of them. He'd been truly spooked when he arrived too.* This troubled Moshe somewhat, so after a short wait he decided to check things out at his friend's hotel. He pulled on his jacket, grabbed a few things from a drawer in his desk and left, walking slowly towards the Jaffa Gate. Once in the vicinity of the hotel, he found himself a snug corner out of sight where he could keep an eye on things. The professor's room was still dark.

*Hmmm... he really should have been back by now.* Moshe waited patiently – something he was good at. He had the patience of a saint and it seemed like half his life had consisted of just waiting. His patience was indeed rewarded although not at all as he'd expected.

Three men approached the hotel. One stood obvious guard outside while the other two entered. Shortly after, Moshe watched as flashes of torch-light lit up the professor's room. Whoever was in there was searching for something. The light moved systematically across the whole room. Moshe decided to move fast and, pulling a grubby old baseball cap from his pocket, he put it on. Then he donned plain glass spectacles in a heavy, dark brown frame, sprinkled some cheap brandy from his hip flask down the front of his shirt and staggered across and into the hotel, as if inebriated. The guy on guard looked right at him, yet



made no attempt to stop him. Moshe instantly surmised that he was Russian, or at the very least eastern bloc.

He stood patiently in a corner of the dimly lit hotel lobby until the proprietor reappeared. Moshe's gamble paid off – the hotel owner had taken the two men to the professor's room and returned to reception with them just a few minutes later. The big one was holding the torch.

"Now what?" said the man holding the torch.

The short wiry man with the chiselled jaw line and wearing the rimless glasses, made no reply and hurried out the door, followed by the guy with the torch. Moshe stepped into the light.

"What were they after?"

The proprietor hadn't noticed him standing there and snapped at him in fright.

"Who are you, and what business is it of yours?"

Moshe flashed his Mossad warrant card, shoving it under the guy's nose. He didn't give him time to check the *valid until* date on it.

"They didn't say, and I wasn't about to refuse their request to look in one of our rooms."

"Did they find anything?"

"No, don't think so. I heard the big one say 'nichts', so, nothing – I understand a little German."

"Has the guest renting the room been back?"

"No. Should I give him a message?"

"What's his room number?"

The hotel proprietor simply handed him the key. Moshe climbed to the upper level, opened the door to Yuri's room and stood momentarily, acclimatising to the dim light. Preferring to leave the room light off, a faint glow from the street lights helped him find his way just as easily. He crossed to the desk, opened the drawer and, taking a small torch from his pocket, placed it in the drawer before switching it on.

*Let's just have a bit of light on the matter.* Some minutes of searching and contemplation later, he felt he knew enough. Yuri Vladishkin must be headed to the airport! There was nothing of any value left behind that he would need. The man with the glasses – surely the brains of the three men who appeared to be after Yuri – would have seen during his search that Yuri's passport, or indeed any other document, was certainly not lying around. So what had they *actually* been looking for? His friend had always been entirely at ease, except for earlier.

Moshe didn't doubt for a second that Yuri's story about men chasing him was genuine, but *why* were they after him? What was the reason for his strange

behaviour? Moshe had instinctively deduced that his friend was holding something back. He hadn't questioned him more, again, instinctively knowing that Yuri would only have prevaricated anyway.

Moshe returned the key to the hotel proprietor and left the hotel. He hastened to find his old VW and sped towards Ben Gurion airport. Unfortunately, he only got there two hours later. His car had given up the ghost half way there, and it took him ages to get the damned old wreck running again.

## 2.

Dutch student Ilse de Weerdt had tagged onto a group of American tourists she'd met near the Jaffa Gate. It was her only way of taking a tour and learning about this old city's culture, and it was really smothered in it. She just didn't have the wherewithal to pay for a guided tour, so she had simply asked one of the Americans if he minded at all if she joined them. He'd said she was more than welcome, so...

They were slowly approaching the square with other tour groups gathered there, as well as loads of touts selling head squares and other suitable attire for any female wishing to actually visit the Wailing Wall up close. She herself had already dressed appropriately. It's tradition to leave a folded up note bearing a wish, or perhaps a resolution, in a crack between the stones.

The tour she'd joined had actually been very interesting and had the Wailing Wall as its ultimate stop. She had been listening attentively to the English-speaking guide when there was a sudden commotion. In the tumult she was pushed roughly, causing her to stumble backwards. Nearby, a weaponed soldier had detained some huge bloke who was holding an old man by his jacket collar.

*Surely a pickpocket*, she thought. As she watched, another couple of Israeli soldiers rocked up, then two other men. The smaller of the three men spoke to the soldiers. The old man tried to wriggle free, but really had no chance. Her view was obstructed momentarily by another group of tourists streaming onto the square. Ilse shrugged. Her group of Americans was just further up, and they seemed to be taking leave of their guide. Ilse was about to join them when she noticed a little black film canister in the gutter, right next to a discarded cola can. Someone must have lost it. She bent to pick it up, then looked around to see if anyone was busy with their camera, or looked as if they were searching for something. Nobody. She hurriedly rejoined the Americans.

"Anybody drop a film roll perhaps?"

They all shook their heads, no. She chatted a while with one of the ladies who asked where she was from and what she was doing in Israel, then waved everyone goodbye. She shook the tour guide's hand sincerely.

"You were really great," she said.

He thanked her and called after her as she walked off.

“Hope to see you again!”

Ilse waved and left the scene.

It was already dark by the time she reached her hotel. After a nice cool shower, Ilse took a walk to the nearby stall with the *best* falafel and shoarma *ever*, *bar none!* Totally at ease, she strolled back to her room and grabbed a cold beer from the fridge. She turned on the TV and watched some CNN – local channels weren’t much use to her. The roll of film was entirely forgotten.

*Another two days and then my holiday is over. Back to bleak old Holland, work and normal life.* ‘Life’ had had its up and downs, but everything had pretty much settled down now. Ilse was Dutch, child of a ‘mixed marriage’ – Dutch mother, Turkish father. She was born and bred in Amsterdam and had had a fun childhood there, until she was ten. Her father had been a kind-hearted, westernised muslim, who visited the mosque only rarely. Her mother, almost thirty years younger than her father, wasn’t at all religious as far as Ilse ever knew. Differing greatly in age, her parents still made the perfect couple, and they never quarrelled. Her dad worked for KLM at Schiphol Airport.

Shortly after her tenth birthday, Ilse’s life had been turned dramatically upside down. Her parents had been returning from a work’s night out at Schiphol when they were driven off the road by a drunk driver, just outside the airport. Dead at the scene.

Initially, an uncle on her mother’s side took her to live with his family. That was a disaster right from the off. This uncle was a known alcoholic and Child Welfare removed Ilse from the family within the month. Her father’s family all lived in Turkey and while she knew none of them anyway, neither did any of them offer to look after her. Her Dutch grandfather was long dead and the grandmother was in an old folk’s home.

Technically orphaned, she was finally fostered out to a family that already had two sons, both a few years younger than her. Her foster father had his own flower export company, exporting mostly to Russia, where he was busily involved in expanding his company. Her foster mother’s job as editor at a publisher’s, permitted her to do loads of work from home, enabling her to be around more.

Her foster parents were ecstatic to have her and gave her everything she could possibly need or want, and yet she never did feel entirely at home there. She was the apple of her foster father’s eye from day one and she only needed to mention something and he’d buy it for her. This, of course, made the boys jealous, but nothing that was particularly different to what happens in the best of families.

The foster mother was the problem. She gradually became more and more irritated with her husband's attitude towards the children, causing more and more rows. Ilse got a hugely expensive scooter from her foster father for her sixteenth and her foster mother could not hide her annoyance.

"I suspect there's more to this than just an expensive gift," she snarled at him, unaware that Ilse could hear her.

Her husband had stared at his wife in dismay before storming out of the house without a word, only returning home in the middle of the night. The quarrel that followed was surely heard by neighbours. Everything went quickly south after that. Her foster father continued to coddle her, seemingly unperturbed by the situation and it continued to create an icy atmosphere in their home. The foster brothers inadvertently profited from the situation because the mother decided to 'spoil' them, as she called it, just as much as she thought her husband was spoiling Ilse. This led to even more tense situations, although that was hardly possible.

She left school at almost eighteen and, although she was a quick learner and knew uni would be great, she just didn't want to go... much to her foster father's consternation. However, she got a job at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and then, only a couple of years later, enrolled herself at the Free University in Amsterdam after all. Initially reading history, she realised after a couple of years that she was increasingly interested in archaeology. This course had her travelling to all sorts of interesting places, like Egypt only last year and now, Israel.

She was having such a great trip, despite Israel being much more expensive than she'd envisioned. Still, she had managed to cover everything she'd intended. She realised she should have arranged a longer stay in Jerusalem. It was too late to sort anything so she determined to return next year. Israel was of course unimaginably richly steeped in history, so Greece and Italy would just have to wait. Ilse sipped at her lukewarm beer and, grabbing her phone, she punched in a speed-dial number.

"Nathalie van Alphen."

Nathalie always answered with her full name.

"Makes you sound important," she'd explained to Ilse. "Folks then think you must have a BA at the very least."

Ilse never did as Nat suggested though, because her own surname was actually Kizilirmak. She had enough difficulty herself pronouncing it correctly so, after the death of her parents, she had taken her mother's maiden name, De Weerd - actually not a whole lot easier to anyone outside Holland.

"Hey, Nat, it's Ilse. Miss me even a little?"

“Hiya! Don’t tell me you’re staying for longer? There will be someone else sleeping in your bed then!”

Nathalie roared with laughter.

“No, course not. I miss you too. All good?”

They chatted for a few minutes before Ilse said goodbye and hung up. They called each other every day. Nathalie, or Nat, as Ilse usually called her, wasn’t just a friend; they had been partners this last year. They met at the VU where Nathalie had already been a second year student, and they had quickly become good friends. Things just naturally seemed to segue into a loving relationship. Although their relationship wasn’t a secret, neither did they shout about it from the rooftops.

They were actually two very different characters, and differed physically too. Nathalie was chubby with short, blonde hair and greeny-blue eyes with long eye-lashes. She was extremely outspoken. Not conventionally pretty, she could be very charming. Her childhood had been pretty miserable, involving sexual abuse by an uncle over several years when she was very young.

Ilse was more or less her girlfriend’s antipole, being quite olive skinned with big, dark eyes and long black hair. She was very slender and was most definitely considered attractive – men did a double-take as they passed her. She’d had a few boyfriends and became sexually active pretty early on, but had never had any satisfaction from any contact. After meeting Nathalie and becoming ‘More acquainted’, the doors of perception – and ecstasy – had truly opened for her. Her foster father knew all about Nathalie and, although initially taken aback, he was quite at home in their company.

Nathalie and Ilse lived in a shockingly expensive rental, an old apartment in central Amsterdam. Ilse would have preferred something less expensive but ‘The lady’s not for turning’.

“Quality costs money and the Van Baerlestraat delivers. But hey, if that’s what you want, by all means, go ahead. I’ll come and visit you now and again in your dump in the suburbs,” she’d laughed.

Ilse sighed. It was late already and she still wanted to walk through the old city in search of some souvenirs tomorrow morning. She’d seen a print of Da Vinci’s famous ‘Last Supper’ – the one with this woman at the table with Jesus. She intended taking home a decent souvenir from every country she visited, and even although neither she nor Nathalie was at all religious, this was pretty classy.

Live and let live, was Nathalie’s motto, and Ilse could only agree. She figured that religion was akin to culture really. She respected all religions, as long as

no-one tried to convert her. With those thoughts in her head, Ilse fell into a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

Winston Medeiros was exhausted, and he put aside the report he'd already perused several times. He turned in his chair to look out his office window, and he idly sat watching the ever-present faithful on St. Peter's Square. The report had only confirmed his fears and suspicions. He would have to take urgent action.

A cardinal for ten years now, he had been attached to the Vatican only since May. The Pope was a personal friend of many years and had appointed him Chair of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Congregation had been founded to defend the Church from heresy and to guard the purity of the Roman Catholic faith. It sought out all and any aberration, and it counteracted them when and if at all possible. The incumbent Pope had been Chair prior to his engagement, and by appointing Medeiros as his successor after his own appointment as Supreme Pontiff, he had instilled Winston with full confidence in his powers to keep the Catholic doctrine pure.

Winston had already undergone quite some critique from the USA because he apparently hadn't come down hard enough on the American priesthood after the exposure of all the sexual offences perpetrated. He had perhaps misjudged the situation and had promised to improve. He considered it only right that any 'dirty washing' was hung strictly indoors and he'd managed that up until now. There was way more to it than anything that had reached the press so far. The whole subject was no longer headline news, but damned if it didn't keep cropping up.

His current job was tailor-made. A strict believer in Catholic dogma, he was a loyal supporter of the previous Pope's views on homosexuality, abortion and women priests. He would always immediately reprimand whichever ecclesiastical dignitary, wherever and whenever it proved necessary. Indeed, while the subject matter could be somewhat controversial, the actual doctrine of the incumbent Pope – in all ways similar to that of his predecessor – was clear as day. Cardinals and bishops were fully expected to follow any papal directives *to the letter*. There must be none of this 'room for interpretation'.

The case before him had hit him like a bolt from the blue. He sank into deep thought about the moment Father Josef Schwartzstein had entered his office with the report.

German Father Josef was a confidant of his, tasked with investigating anything that could possibly involve the teachings of the Holy Church, translating and deciphering writings about Jesus, and other founders of the faith. Josef had been affiliated to the Congregation for years already and had done a lot of good work.

Winston's predecessor had originally promoted Josef, during the time when a number of media outlets had been disseminating lies about Our Lord. For instance, *'Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene'* – the woman who was also supposed to be depicted on Da Vinci's famous 'Last Supper'! That all soon fizzled out. Still... while there was absolutely no proof of this nonsense, Catholic experts and appropriate scientists in the know had sown doubt about these stories where they could. Schwartzstein had even informed Medeiros precisely which Catholic professors could best countermand such rumours as the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

This was so important! There were many priests, mostly of the younger generation, who tended to want more women in spiritual posts within the Church and also wanted to have marriage for priests, on the agenda at the very least. If proof were found that Our Lord had carnal knowledge of Mary Magdalene – a prostitute for goodness sake! – the call to rescind celibacy would only become louder. The subject had been entirely unnegotiable with the previous and, luckily, the incumbent Pope. It had practically caused a schism in the Holy Church! And now...

"The excavations that began near the Dead Sea three months ago revealed the foundations of a small convent. Initially, there was nothing unusual to report, until one of the archaeologists found... something," Josef Schwartzstein had said then had stood awaiting a response.

"Yes. I read about that dig," Medeiros had said. "The convent was probably founded early A.D. – and they dug up twelve human skeletons."

"Correct. Everyone thought that was all there was to it. Then I heard that one of the archaeologists had been found dead in his home. Murdered. Two stabs to the throat. The case had been closed and motive given as theft, although it was unknown just what could have been stolen by the murderer. All in all, rather suspicious. The archaeologist was a young volunteer, a student called David Hearn."

Someone had come in with some water then and Josef had stopped his tale as he took some to drink.

"Go on," Winston had said, once the man with the tray had closed the door behind him.



“My informant, Asher Berenson is a British student working on the project as an up-and-coming archaeologist. He told me that Hearn found something a month before he died and had taken it home. Hearn had told Berenson in confidence that what he’d found ‘could turn the entire Catholic Church upside down’. He failed to elaborate upon what he’d meant by that. Everyone who worked on the project was investigated by the authorities. No artefact, nor any information about the murder, was unearthed. The murdered archaeologist’s house, where he lived alone, was of course forensically investigated, but there were no clues as to any motive for his murder. I’d have left it at that if I hadn’t found out something else. Something that the Israelis probably don’t yet know about.”

“And what’s that?”

“Well, about a week before the young archaeologist was murdered, he had a break-in. The thief knew exactly what he was looking for and *he* made off with the findings from the dig.”

“Why do you think the authorities know nothing about what the murdered archaeologist had found?”

“I’m not *entirely* sure that they don’t know, or at least *didn’t* know at the time. I only suspect it, because they immediately turned to the project leaders and all other participants in the dig. They don’t appear to be searching for anything other than a murderer.”

“It all sounds so complicated and a bit far-fetched,” said Winston.

“I’m afraid it’s about to get even more complicated. Berenson told *me* that Hearn arrived at work slightly late one day, and he told him hurriedly that he’d been broken into the night before. He said that the burglar had taken certain documents *and a roll of film*. Asher said his friend was really pretty upset and had been very skittish ever since.”

“Still doesn’t say much to me,” shrugged Winston. “While we still don’t know just what the archaeologist found, or whether it is of any import to the Mother Church, the whole affair means nothing.”

“I would agree with you completely, Eminence, but there’s more.”

Josef had taken a grubby envelope from his pocket.

“The text in this letter is in Hebrew. I took the liberty of translating it. I can assure your eminence, the translation is accurate.”

“How did you get this?” Winston had asked, laying the envelope on his desk.

“Three days after the break-in, Hearn gave this letter to Asher Berenson with the request that Berenson put it in the hands of a Catholic priest should anything happen to him, Hearn. He gave no further explanation and although Asher told me he never opened the letter, I know that’s a lie.”

Winston had taken a sheet of paper from the envelope and looked at the Hebrew writing he had no talent for. The first lines were written in a slovenly handwriting and obviously written in haste. The second part was written neatly and one line had been underscored. He took up the translation and read:

*I have personally handed this letter to Asher Berenson, requesting that he give it to a Roman Catholic priest should anything untoward happen to me. Any priest will know what to do. The case I refer to, was stolen from me three days ago. I truly fear for my life!*

*To the God-fearing clergyman who has been handed this letter.*

*My name is David Hearn. I am Jewish and a student of archaeology. This was not my first dig. My father and I emigrated from the USA to Israel, after my mother was killed in the crossfire during a holdup at a supermarket. He died three years ago and the rest of my family lives in America.*

*The dig near the Dead Sea wasn't very interesting at all, until I found something that piqued my curiosity. What I found was a slim and slender shaped, clay pitcher with a long neck. There was no decoration on the jug at all and it was miraculously unscathed, sealed with more clay. I was the last person still around the dig that day, and it was already dusk when I found the pitcher.*

*I know I should have handed it to Professor Vladishkin, but my inherent curiosity won me over. I managed to secrete the bottle in my jacket and took it with me to the dig tent, where everyone was leaving for home. I did too, and I took the pitcher with me.*

*Once home, I attempted to open it. I was making no headway at all when at some point I became careless and dropped it, smashing it in two. It was then that I first discovered that it stored rolls of papyrus. I'm a student of archaeology, believe me, I know the difference between parchment and papyrus.*

*I unrolled the scrolls as carefully as I could, and I photographed them with my old film camera. Both scrolls immediately struck me to be letters. I also study ancient languages, but do not as yet master Aramaic. This was the language spoken and written hereabouts, in Israel, around 2,000 years ago.*

*I borrowed an appropriate dictionary from a friend, and it took me all weekend to decipher just a part of the text. Just that part had me reeling where I sat. My initial impulse was to destroy the scrolls, but I was held back by the thought that perhaps this truth needed to be publicised to the Roman Catholics around the world?*

*Jesus was not the man he made himself out to be!*

*I do not doubt the authenticity of the scrolls, but as I am merely a student, more investigation will certainly be necessary.*

*I took a full roll of twelve photographs of the scrolls, then stored them, together with the roll of film in its canister, in a leather artwork portfolio case. Some of the photos I took may be of no use as the flash failed a few times.*

The letter stopped rather abruptly. The cardinal had looked back at the underlined sentence that had all but seared his eyeballs. 'Jesus was not the man he made himself out to be'. This young archaeologist had found proof of this? And he'd taken pictures?

"A fraud," he had said, as nonchalantly as he could muster.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. That one line in the letter, your Eminence – it gives me shivers up and down my spine."

*Me too*, thought Winston.

"Go back to Jerusalem. Find out all you can and keep me informed."

That had been a week ago now. Winston had considered whether or not to inform His Holiness, but he more or less immediately rejected the idea. The information he had was too vague and certainly too sensitive. Just *how* sensitive became even clearer after an email from Schwartzstein, bringing him up to speed with the situation.

Josef's informant had apparently admitted to being the burglar! *He* had stolen the art portfolio and had thereafter murdered Hearn. The rest wasn't all that clear to him.

How the German priest had got the young man to talk?... Winston didn't want to know! These were difficult times for the Mother Church – anything goes in an emergency! The informant had apparently panicked and had sold the art portfolio to a shopkeeper for next to nothing, in the conviction that said shopkeeper would never remember him anyway. The email report ended with a curt 'We have nothing more to fear from the informant'.

Cardinal Medeiros made the sign of the cross. Unfortunately, things weren't over yet. In a series of unimaginable coincidences, it turned out, according to Schwartzstein, that the Russian professor in charge of the dig had come into possession of the case. Father Josef had caught up with the professor at one point, but had had to let him go...

'... but I hope to be able to interrogate him either tonight or tomorrow. I shall keep your Eminence informed.'

The email ended on those words.

Winston stared out over St. Peter's Square for a long time. The street lights had come on now. He really hoped Josef would be able to get his hands on the papyrus scrolls, and find the roll of film too, and quickly. He would then be able to examine everything really thoroughly, before destroying it all. All of this though... it might well have consequences for everyone and anyone who knew about the contents or even the existence of the scrolls. He made the sign of the cross again and prayed to God for forgiveness, telling himself '*sacrifices must be made*' and '*it can't be helped*'. The fundamental principles of Catholicism were under attack so, a few sacrifices?... well, they barely mattered.