

FIRST FRIDAY (late afternoon and evening)

#### ***CHAPTER 4: THE KHAN***

"And it came to pass on the morrow, that an evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved in the midst of the house."  
(FIRST SAMUEL 18:10)

Thirty feet from the edge of the ridge stood a low structure, similar to a lean-to, several hundred feet square. This was the khan, where I would eat and sleep during my stay in Shacharut. The khan and its entrance were unchanged from my visits of one and two summers before.

In Turkish, *khan* refers to a medieval tribal ruler. Westerners might associate the word with Genghis Khan, who conquered China in the late medieval period. In Arabic, *khan* refers to a rest house or caravansary. In the desert, such structures would be simple. The khan of Shacharut held to that tradition.

Its rough walls were formed from broken slabs of limestone scavenged from the desert floor. A nearly flat roof covered it. Like the shelter of the camel yard, the roof was layered with desiccated palm fronds—a vain attempt to mitigate the sun's heat. Modest roof overhangs in part shielded dust-laden windows jutting from the north and west of the structure. They were hinged at their tops and propped open with heavy sticks, allowing the wind to pass through. A section of the east wall lay open, framing the Arava and the Mountains of Edom. This imitated the *Bedu* custom of facing tents toward the rising sun. A kitchen area attached to the rear, boasting a galvanized iron roof, completed the structure.

Three stone steps between the north windows led to a roughly framed entrance, covered with a frayed blanket. It was partially turned back to allow entry. Tomer and I descended the steps, brushing against the blanket as we entered.

Notwithstanding its crude construction, the interior of the khan offered, as in previous years, a surprising welcome. The earth floor had been leveled to form three shallow terraces, each held in place by small logs. The terraces were covered with colored mats, evoking the

image of *Bedu* carpets. Wooden reels, which once held electrical cables, were laid on their sides to serve as ersatz tables. In *Bedu* fashion, numerous colored cushions lay around the tables, taking the place of chairs. All was laden with dust, carried by the almost constant wind.

Except for the blanketed entrance to the kitchen, the south wall extended the full length of the structure. A narrow, deep-maroon covering, backed by a subdued brown-striped cloth, hung at its center. Its tassels identified it as a camel blanket. The remainder of the wall was draped with cloth covers—all woven with horizontal stripes in varied earth colors.

They reminded me of the stripes of the *tallit*, the fringed prayer shawl worn by Jewish adults during prayer. I marveled at how the motif of the *tallit* had maintained a continuity with its desert origins through a Diaspora of 2,000 years and a transition from nomads to settled people, yet a thousand years before that. Perhaps this was why I felt a familiar comfort in returning here year after year.

In front of the wall stood a rectangular iron stove centered on a stone platform, which rose a few inches above the floor. Several open-mouthed clay water jars—*jahrah* in Arabic and the origin of the English word—sat on the stove, still in use, despite the advent of plastics. Shaped like flat-bottomed amphora—the curved storage jars of the ancient Mediterranean—their molded bodies conveyed a vague sense of the exotic. Before the stove, a brass coffee pot engraved with arabesque sat on a low, flat stone. To its side stood an intricately carved wooden mortar and pestle. Caked by the ever-present dust, the texture of the wood was barely discernible. Only the upper part of the pestle stood out, stained black from the sweat of generations of users.

"Those are for grinding coffee," Tomer spoke. "Brewing coffee is part of desert hospitality. It is strong coffee—much different from what Americans drink. We sip it black, never with cream or sugar. As the *Bedu* say, 'strong as a man, dark as the night, and bitter as life.'"

My neck tightened at the pain his words conveyed.

Tomer opened his palm toward me, pointing downward, evoking a silent request that I allow him to stay. I nodded, and we settled onto the cushions. For a long moment, we sat in silence. Then, he continued his story—an odyssey of death, despair, and redemption. It was to me, the stranger, who in the male date palm had seen life, that he bared his soul.

The son of Moroccan Jews, he was raised on a kibbutz in the Galilee. His parents spoke

Arabic at home, as did many Moroccan immigrants. Tomer was fluent, albeit in a dialect scarcely understandable to the Arabs of Palestine. At 18, he began his service in the Israeli Defense Force. Following his obligatory three years, he remained. He had become a professional soldier.

During the *Intifada* of 1987–1993—the first uprising of the Palestinians against Israeli occupation—he was assigned riot control duty. It was a conflict infinitely less bloody and bitter than the second *Intifada* that began in 2000. Then, the demonization, each side of the other, was neither as pervasive nor as deep as would occur later. By accident, Tomer shot and killed a 10-year-old boy, one of a relative handful who were killed during those first years of unrest.

At that time, the Western press avidly pursued that "human interest" of the Israeli–Palestinian tragedy, sometimes accompanied by a picture of the mourning parents of a slain child. It never touched the tragedy from the Israeli perspective—the anguish of an unwilling killer.

The horror of his act consumed Tomer, driving him into unrelenting depression. He sought relief from an army psychiatrist. But, neither psychotherapy nor antidepressants assuaged his agony. After six months, the army released him as unfit for duty.

For years, he wandered in torment, seldom sleeping more than two hours a night. He came to the desert in the desperate hope of exorcising the demons of his soul. In its solitary quiet, among the handful of guides at Shacharut, he began to find solace.

"Here people are real. Bragging impresses no one. You learn everything about each other. You can't hide. You are who you are. The desert cleans your soul."

And, unspoken by Tomer, you are accepted regardless of who you are, or what, in the past, you may have done. True to *Bedu* custom even today, in the desert all are equal before God. And it was here Tomer began to regain his soul and to sleep through the night.

"I now know that I must work with children—with young boys. In a week, I will be leaving for a kibbutz near Jerusalem. They have a school. I can teach there full time.

"In the spring, I drove 11 camels through the desert from Be'er Sheva to Ramon Crater and then to Shacharut. We traveled six days, up to 30 or 40 kilometers a day. I came upon an old *Bedu*. With sign language, he invited me into his tent to eat, drink, and rest. We exchanged no words, except when I thanked him at the end."

Tomer's abrupt shift of subject startled me. Then I understood. The old *Bedu* had also

accepted Tomer. He offered the hospitality of the desert, with no questions asked and no explanations required.

Tomer paused, inhaled deeply, and exhaled. "We will eat in an hour. That will give you time to shower. I will see you then." We grasped hands and he parted.

I felt in awe of the moment—that Tomer had chosen to reveal himself to me. Only three years later, while redrafting this manuscript, did I come to comprehend more fully the curative powers of the desert.

In the compressed humanity of a city, those in pain suffer the poignant loneliness of the crowd. In the desert, the emptiness compels people to talk. With that, those in pain assuage the turmoil of their souls.