

Chapter 1

Dead Sea, Israel, 10:30 p.m.

His target was one of the most dangerous men alive, but the killer told himself he held the advantage. The lapping of the waves covered the sound of his movements and would allow him to get close. Once he got close, his "friendship" with the man would give him the split-second advantage he needed. When he reached a gap in the rocks he spotted his target, silhouetted by the moonlight, talking on his cell.

As he anticipated, the man was calling for reinforcements. The killer allowed himself a smile; his own reinforcements were already organized and en route. Only one man opposed them: the man speaking on his cell phone.

He continued weaving his way among the bone-white rock formations, hoping to get alongside the target before coming onto the open beach. Then his foot slipped, dislodging a rock. His target altered his stance. Even from a distance of thirty feet and amid the sound of the lapping waves, the dangerous man had still heard him. Butterfly wings of fear caressed the inside of his stomach.

The killer decided and moved. He stepped out of the rocks, brandishing a small sketch pad with one hand and the murder weapon, a charcoal pencil, with the other. He hummed "Nothing but

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE.....2

the Blood of Jesus," knowing his target would hear him and would recognize the tune.

"Bobby, is that you?" the dangerous man asked, pocketing his cell phone.

Like you don't know, the killer thought. "Daniel? What are you doing here?"

"I was thinking and enjoying the sunset."

"Also me." The young killer who called himself Bobby smiled and held up his pad and sharpened pencil. "Now, I will sketch in the moonlight."

Daniel laughed and Bobby saw him relax. He had worked hard at making Daniel like him. For several weeks he had presented himself to Daniel and the rest of the dig as an idealistic divinity student who volunteered to work on Archaeology sites in the hope of discovering biblical artifacts. Bobby told everyone who would listen that he dreamed of helping prove to the world the accuracy of the Bible. On several occasions he had arranged for Daniel to find him while he pretended to be engrossed in his Bible or in prayer.

Bobby knew that like him, Daniel had been searching for the artifacts that Doctor Elliot and his team had discovered. It didn't matter if Daniel was aware of the information contained on the scrolls or whether he understood the world upheaval that would occur if it was made public. What did matter was that

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE.....3

Daniel already sensed a threat to the scrolls, even if he didn't know just how immediate the threat was.

"Mind if I take a look?" Daniel asked the killer.

"Nope," Bobby grinned. "I'm going to show you whether you want to see it or not." He flipped the first two pages of his pad back and then made a critical face as he came alongside his target. Daniel lowered his head and leaned over the sketch.

"Wait," Bobby said. He changed his grip so that the pencil pointed toward Daniel and began erasing a stray line. Without looking, he thrust his pencil up and into the side of his target's throat, pulled back to widen the gash in the windpipe, and dropped the pencil, all in one smooth movement.

The young assassin almost didn't survive. Rather than trying to cover his throat, Daniel struck out at Bobby, who deflected the blow just enough to send it glancing off the side of his head. Dazed, he nevertheless managed to grasp the offending hand and, after a brief struggle, captured Daniel's other hand as well.

Daniel strained to shake free, but Bobby was ready and strong. He held onto Daniel's hands until his victim weakened and sank to his knees.

After Daniel died, Bobby released his wrists and slumped for a moment amid the monotony of the waves splashing onto the shore. The struggle had left him weary, but he didn't get much time to

recuperate before he heard the sound of approaching voices. Bad luck. Hardly anyone ever came out here at night, but he heard at least two people walking among the rocks, headed in his direction.

Bobby retrieved his pencil and pad and stowed them in his cargo pocket. He had planned on sinking the body with rocks, but the voices kept getting closer.

He grabbed the dead man's ankles and dragged him into the water. The body floated easily in the briny water, so he kept towing it behind him until the water reached his chest. This end of the Dead Sea was shallow, allowing Bobby to wade out some distance from shore. Finally he shoved Daniel's corpse farther into the sea and made his way back, as silently and swiftly as he could manage.

XxxxX

Doctor Kevin Elliot shielded his eyes against the rising sun and squinted at a figure running across the rocky desert terrain, waving its arms and shouting. He was grateful for the diversion; he'd been talking with Jill Gates, his site deputy, and it seemed like the more time he spent with her, the more distracted he became.

"Can you make out who that is?" he said, pointing. "They're going to end up hurting themselves and delay the extraction of the artifacts."

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE..... 5

"I think it's Alice," Jill said.

"What's she shouting? I can't make it out."

"Me either. She's still too far away. I hope everything's all right."

"Speaking of Alice . . . Jill, I want you to make sure she's not on the excavation team roster."

"Kevin, this is an important opportunity for everyone and you know how—"

"No, Jill. She's too high-strung to even be in the cave, let alone handling those scrolls."

Kevin turned to face her, even though he found it easier to concentrate when he wasn't looking at her. It was his responsibility to mentor the promising, newly minted archaeologist and the time had come for her to learn a difficult lesson. It struck him yet again how much she reminded him of Amy. That was the irony: he felt guilty for being so attracted to Jill, but the reason he was so attracted to her was because she was so much like Amy.

"Kevin?"

"Um, wait." He'd made the mistake of looking into her eyes and had lost track of what he'd been saying—a total blank. Kevin unscrewed the top of his canteen and took a long drink of water to buy himself time. The Dead Sea air had a habit of sucking the

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE..... 6

moisture out of one's throat, so Jill didn't seem to sense his confusion. It came to him. *Right: friendship versus duty . . .*

"Listen," he said, handing her the open canteen, "I know she's your friend and I agreed to bring her along not only because she's competent, but also to make a point."

Jill took a drink of water but kept her eyes on Kevin.

"We—you and I—are the guardians of whatever artifacts we find on this or any other site."

Jill nodded, handing him back the canteen as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I chose you as deputy for this project over a number of more qualified candidates, because I see in you the potential to become a great site archaeologist."

"I know that, and don't think I'm not—"

"So far, you've met all my expectations," he went on. "Now it's time for a difficult lesson. When you're onsite, you're obligated to history, to these artifacts. These, or the artifacts you discover on the next dig, may be the only evidence of a civilization, a historic event, or the existence of a previously unknown historic figure. The artifacts you discover are irreplaceable."

"Help! Someone call . . . Doctor Elliot . . . I, we . . ."

Jill glanced toward the distant voice, but Kevin kept his eyes fixed on her face.

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE.....7

"You hearing me on this?" he said.

"Yes."

"Your friendship with Alice isn't your primary obligation. Your obligation to this site, to preserving history, supersedes any other loyalty you have: friends, family, anything. There are great lab and campus archaeologists and technicians and there are great site archaeologists and technicians. That's why I chose you; you and I, we're site archaeologists. Your friend Alice . . ."

"It's a . . . body, there's . . . a body floating . . . in the water."

". . . is going to be a fine lab assistant or community college . . ."

"Kevin?" she said, glancing in the direction of Alice's voice.

". . . professor, but she's not a site archaeologist. Off the team, Jill, understand?" Kevin tuned out Alice and her shouting. He concentrated on ensuring Jill Gates not only followed his instructions, but understood the reasons for them.

"Yes, I understand. What about the body?"

"What body? Oh . . ."

Kevin looked away from Jill and back toward the sea. Alice was close now, and although she seemed out of breath, he heard her all too clearly.

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE..... 8

A body . . . great. The team had just discovered a most unusual find, and while it was premature to reach any conclusions, something so painstakingly preserved as this was surely had to be important, even if only to the person or persons who concealed the cave chamber. Now his expedition was going to be delayed because someone drowned.

"Go get my satellite phone," he said. "I'll intercept Alice down near the vehicles. That's got to be Todd following after her; they're always together. He's pretty steady, so by the time you get the phone we should know what's going on. Okay?"

"On my way."

"Jill."

"Yeah?" She turned back toward him.

"No Alice on the team. No matter what this is about, I don't want her near the scrolls."

Chapter 2

The dead body was floating in the Dead Sea.

The grim pun didn't occur to Inspector Moshe Aarons until he stood along the rocky shoreline, pretending he couldn't hear the complaints of his men.

"This water will ruin my clothes and I'll have a rash for weeks. Why can't we wait for the divers?"

"Lots of reasons," Aarons said without bothering to turn around. "One of them is that I don't want the body to deteriorate any more than it already has. Go get it and bring it on shore."

The grumbling continued as the two policemen waded into the water after the corpse. Aarons was used to it. Israeli national police assignments were not known for their glamour, but in his opinion, Negev Desert, South Dead Sea sector was the worst. It shriveled men up, killed off their marriages, and gave them a lasting hatred for the desert. Maintaining morale posed a challenge.

He flipped open his cell phone and called his second-in-command, Deputy Inspector Ben Kahn.

"Ben, who's missing?"

"The entire archaeological team's here, but some of the interns and assistants on the project are still scattered. The laborers, a lot of them are Bedouin day laborers—"

"Gather them up. Depending upon how long the body's been in the water, it might take us a while to identify it. As soon as the body's secure I'll have a little talk with Doctor . . . what's his name?"

"Elliot. Kevin Elliot, from Dawson Ridge University. He's standing right beside me and can probably hear what you're saying. You'll be pleased to know the good doctor has learned quite a bit of Hebrew along the way."

"How convenient." So much for private conversations, Aarons thought. He heard the archaeologist's voice in the background.

"Please tell your inspector I have a limited budget, limited time, and yesterday we . . ."

"Is that Elliot?" Aarons said.

"Yes Inspector," Kahn said. "Doctor Elliot, someone's dead," Aarons heard Kahn say to the American. "I don't know about America, but over here we investigate that sort of thing. The more you cooperate, the sooner you'll be able to get back to work."

"Permits," Aarons said into the phone. He could hear Elliot erupting in the background again.

"Do you really think any archaeologist is a—"

"Doctor Elliot, please," Kahn said, cutting him off.

"Everything looks okay, Inspector," Kahn said.

"Did you call or check the paperwork on site?"

"Both. I contacted the Interior Ministry in Jerusalem and I'm waiting for a call back. I checked the paperwork on site and it's complete: copies of the visas, antiquities permits, the works. We're in the process of comparing the list of staff with the people we've checked in. I've got a second list for the hangers-on and the laborers. We're checking them off, too."

Aarons watched his men secure the body and start back toward the shoreline, towing the corpse by its ankles. He had no doubt that unless he intervened, they would keep dragging it up and over the beach rocks.

"Ben, is Elliot going to be a pain in the rear?"

"He wants to get back to work," Kahn replied. "You know these guys: 'earth shattering discovery' and all that. He's not that bad."

"I'll be there directly." Aarons snapped the phone shut and walked up to the water's edge. "Stop! Don't drag him over the rocks; we'll use the gurney."

Aarons motioned to another grimacing policeman who rolled an ambulance gurney down into the water and then helped hoist the corpse onto it.

LEWIS/ THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE..... 12

The Israelis rolled, pulled, and tugged the gurney up over a shoreline consisting entirely of dime-, hand-, and head-sized rock, all stained bright white by the minerals in the water. As the death cart rolled past him, Aarons motioned for the men to stop. He bent over and examined the corpse's face and torso.

"The victim is a European male in his late 40s, early 50s," he said into a voice recorder. "The body exhibits a puncture wound and tear in the left side of the throat. There's moderate inflammation of the skin, indicating a short period of time in the water."

Aarons grabbed the man's shirtsleeves and pulled them back, first the left and then the right, up to the elbow. Several of the officers crowded around him.

"No sign of defensive wounds. Wait . . . an abrasion on one knuckle and some bruising around the wrists. The victim may have been bound at some point." Aarons slid his hand under the body and felt for the dead man's wallet. It was still in his right hip pocket. He pulled the wallet out and looked through it. The victim carried around a lot of money, but no ID of any kind. He looked up at his men. "All right, radio it in as a homicide."

THE DIARIES OF PONTIUS PILATE, by Joseph Max Lewis

Available from Trestle Press - August 3, 2012