

*Jerusalem, June 15, 2012*

David Chambers raised his video camera and pointed it at a limestone facing that had fallen from the north wall and settled at the base of the narrow tunnel. He had seen fifteen such structural failures so far and wouldn't be surprised to see more. He was viewing work done two millennia ago—work that hadn't been seen for twenty centuries. What surprised him was that there wasn't more damage. He had been in tunnels that required weeks of clearing.

The light of the camera illuminated the larger stones that provided the structural support for the tunnel. At first glance they looked like the blocks he had seen at the mouth of the passageway, ten miles back. Aboveground surveys indicated the rough tunnel ran almost eleven miles. On even terrain, a man could make three miles an hour. Here, things went much slower.

Chambers directed the camera in a slow arc, letting the lens take in every detail. It was his first pass through the tunnel, and he wanted a record that he could study for years to come.

Archaeology had a reputation for excitement and startling discovery. Most days it was just plain hard, dirty work—labor that involved equal amounts of mind-breaking scholarship and backbreaking physical work. Scholarships, perspiration, and luck were the triplets of his science.

He turned off the camera and let the blackness envelop him. A second later his heart rate doubled, and he could feel his blood pressure rise. The last sensation, he figured, was more imagination than fact, but it was real to him.

“Easy.” He whispered the word to himself. He was alone in the tunnel. That was a choice made from ego and good archaeology. He wanted to be the first human to traverse the length of King Herod's ancient tunnel since it had been

closed so many decades ago; he also wanted to limit the number of hands and feet in the site until he recorded everything he could.

Chambers closed his eyes, as if preventing the darkness from pressing into his brain. He wiped the sweat with his free hand, transferred the camera, and did the same with his other hand.

“Breathe. Slow. Steady. It’s all in your head.”

Chambers held many secrets, but none he buried so deeply as his claustrophobia.

The darkness pressed on him, as if trying to shove him to the ground. Darkness had no mass, possessed no ill will, and was incapable of harming him. That’s what his rational mind told him. His irrational mind begged to differ. Taking in a lungful of the dank air, Chambers forced himself to face his fear again. He had conquered many things in his life; he’d beat this too. Two minutes later he turned on the StenLight S7 mounted to his orange helmet. The lithium-ion-powered lamp pushed back the blackness, reducing it to shadows tucked behind fallen debris. Following guidelines created by cavers, he also carried two other light sources for emergencies.

The presence of the light slowed his heart and his breathing. He took a moment to switch the batteries in the video camera. Once done, he started forward again.

Dust covered the stone floor, dust devoid of footprints. It gave him a sense of pride to know that he was the first man to lay tracks here in a couple of thousand years. That was the real reason he walked the ancient corridor alone. This was his find, and he had earned the right to be the first to walk its length.

King Herod—a vicious, paranoid Jewish king—built the tunnel because he feared a revolt. His radically religious people didn’t consider him one of their own. Strictly speaking, he wasn’t Jewish. Yet Rome sanctioned the Edomite’s throne.

History remembers his great success at building. His expansion of the second temple made it a worldwide wonder. It was the temple Jesus visited, the one in which He overturned the tables of the money-changers, and the place where He often taught. That, of course, was thirty-plus years after Herod the Great's death.

“Herod the Great” was more than a title to the man. He believed his own press. But with great power came greater danger. The king grew more paranoid. Friction and suspicion filled his family, and fearing a takeover by his own sons, he ordered several of them executed. When the wise men from the East came and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” Herod's fear erupted like a volcano. His order led to the slaughter of children two years old and younger living in Bethlehem, the ancient City of David where the prophets foretold the rise of one to rule the House of David.

That same paranoia led to the building of this tunnel. At one end was the Fortress of Antonia; at the other, Herodian Jericho. Chambers wondered if old man Herod had ever walked the length of the corridor.

The revolt Herod feared never came, but death did. Knowing that no one would mourn his passing, Herod gave his final royal decree: the killing of the Jewish elite he had gathered at Jericho. The slaughter was to take place upon his death. If the people wouldn't grieve him, then he'd give them something they could mourn.

The command was ignored.

“You may have been one crazy king, but you knew how to get things done.” The whispered words echoed off the hard surfaces.

Sadness filled David. This was his last dig in Israel. He'd had great success, but it was time to move to another concentration. Many things drove an archaeologist to commit years to study and digging in the dirt. Biblical archaeologists loved the history and significance of biblical sites. Some even

undertook the work because of their faith. Chambers had been one of those; back in the days when he believed.

Now his faith was as dead as old man Herod.

He looked into the darkness ahead.

One mile to go.