

# SOUTH OF JERICHO

## Gavriella

Ziki had only been seated a few moments when Gavriella made an appearance in the dining room of his hotel. He was not surprised. He might have set his watch to her arrival. Even her performance was predictable; she pretended that she didn't know he was there. The maitre d' escorted her to her table and as soon as she saw him she made an artificial high noise, as if in surprise and delight.

"Herr Breckenbauer," she crooned and held out her hand to him.

"Ms. Ramon." He took her hand and kissed the pale back of it, noting that she no longer wore the ring she once refused to remove.

Ziki sat back and surveyed her coolly. "I don't know why I shouldn't have expected you. You'd like to join me, I suppose?"

With every inch of public space in the hotel undoubtedly bugged, she knew she had him. He would have to keep up appearances—a sort of slow torture she would very much enjoy.

"This table will be fine, thank you," Gavriella told the maitre d' and let him pull her chair out for her at Ziki's table.

The maitre d' was trying to complete his duties while at the same time avidly appearing to mind his own business. "Shall... I will bring a place setting promptly."

Ziki rose as Gavriella sat.

He nodded to the maitre d'. "The lady likes to drink Chateau Neuf de Pape. Your oldest bottle please."

"Hans. . . you've always had such a memory. . ." She laughed like a private escort laughs at all of her consorts' jokes.

"Immediately, sir. Enjoy your meal." The maitre d' snapped his heels together, made a swift bow and was gone.

Gavriella was doing her best imitation of a starry eyed tourist. "Such a lovely dining room, isn't it? Like Paris or—"

"What do you want, Gavriella?" Ziki leaned in close. He couldn't keep the strain of contempt out of his voice.

"I'm in the market for a supply of dental drills, Hans. . ." she reached for his hand.

He snatched it away. "Cut to the chase."

She smiled and sat back coolly. The slit of her skirt opened to reveal pale and shapely legs. Noting where his gaze fell, she crossed them slowly, like a cat who thinks itself queen of the forest. As if that wasn't enough, she let the top leg bob to draw his eye once more. "Don't be sore. . ."

"You were watching me today."

"You. . ." she confirmed, "and a little Arab of very poor means. I'm wondering what he



might have to do with the rumors I'm hearing."

"Yes, those rumors."

"He wouldn't have anything to do with—"

Ziki knew to choose his words wisely. "The servant of a business associate," he explained.

"I hardly believe—"

"Believe it."

"Indeed? He seemed a little more frightened than I would think a servant—"

"He was recently terminated for accruing several unseemly debts."

Her eyelids were heavy and her smile never wavered. "Debts?"

She didn't believe him.

He spread his hands. "What can I say—I am a generous man."

She snorted. "You're unbelievable."

The waiter returned to the table with Gavriella's wine. There was a temporary ceasefire as the waiter opened the bottle with a silver corkscrew. He offered Ziki the cork, but he declined.

"It is the lady who considers herself a gourmand," he said.

"Hans!" Gavriella mockingly scolded. "You will spoil me."

She smelled the cork and tasted the wine, swirling the dark richness in her glass before sipping it. "Delicious. You'll just love it."

"Of course." Ziki accepted the glass that the waiter poured and sipped it. It was, as she said, delicious. If only she were as easy on the palate as a fine wine.

"So you're not going to give me a clue?" Gavriella asked as the waiter left them.

"There is nothing to clue; it's not important, petty stuff."

"You know I'll find out."

"If that's what you like to tell yourself."

"Must you always do things the hard way?"

"If you continue to travel a road that is obviously a dead end, yes. That was a long time ago and before..." he paused leaned over the table and hissed in her ear, "Khan Yunis at Gaza, you double crossing bitch."

She whispered back. "It wasn't my call."

"Can't we simply have a nice dinner without the battle of wills?"

He looked at her through cold eyes.

"Remember," she said, returning his indifference with a warmth that did nothing to move him, "Paris. You and me, that little hotel near Le Tour Eiffel on Rue De La Paix. Or better, the night we skied the Swiss Alps at Emmenthaler... The lodge lighted below us and all the stars above."

He looked away from the table. The bar was busy with foreign travelers, businessmen and their wives. Anyone who saw them would think that of them. a business man and his willful, beautiful wife.

He was suddenly tired of fighting.

"I see them too," she said.

He met her gaze, but it dropped immediately to her wine glass.

"Your men," she said.

"Another topic, please."

She leaned forward and placed her hand on his wrist. The shadow of her cleavage was bared as her dress fell open. "Listen, Hans," she stopped and mouthed Ziki, her eyes lingering now on his. "I have seen them so many times. . . I've sent people into the field and wondered if I

would have to tell their families they weren't coming back.”

“Not here—” he said.

“No. I must say this now. I should have said it. A year ago, I should have.”

He stood, fingers pressing the edge of the table. “A pleasure to see you again.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin and threw it down. “I remembered a telephone call that I must make to a client in Tokyo.”

Gavriella sat back.

For a moment he stood looking down on her, not certain if he should believe her or not. Her eyes were huge and full of sadness, but she was a consummate actress and a consummate liar. She had played him before.

“Please. . .” she said, “I need you to forgive me.”

And somehow that struck a chord in him.

“If you leave now, you'll never see me again,” she said. “I'll leave Baghdad. I'll leave the Middle East. I'll leave Europe.”

He sat slowly. But that was what he wanted, wasn't it? To never see her again?

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