

## *Chapter 1*

Mukhtar Sheik Mohammed, clad in an orange jumpsuit, shuffled his shackled feet into Courtroom 10-D of the United States Second District Court. In the early warming days of May all of Manhattan was tense as the first trial of Guantanamo's "Notorious Seven" entered its second week. The pretrial motions and jury challenges were last week's history, but not the prosecution's litany of alleged terrorist attacks. It was 2016, thirteen years since his capture, and Mukhtar was determined to enjoy finally having his day in court. With a slight smile, he mouthed the words as the prosecutor led into the testimony of his prime witness. "... the 1993 World Trade Center bombings, the 2002 attack on the US Bank Tower, the Bali nightclub bombings, the American Airlines Flight 63 bombing, the Millennium Plot, the murder of Daniel Pearl, and the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers." All painted as heinous acts, but to Mukhtar an impressive resume.

Once the prosecutor finished his pitiful attempts to condemn him for eternity, Mukhtar slouched down into his chair; his hands prayerfully peaked under his mustache, preparing to listen intently to the testimony of Captain Raul Roberto. He remembered. He remembered it all, but he wanted to hear every miniscule detail again and again, to fuel the fire of his revenge. "Now Captain Roberto, from your interrogation of the defendant, you have determined that the defendant was responsible for the planning and funding of attacks, is that correct?"

Mukhtar's eyes left the prosecutor and latched onto the soft-faced Army captain looking confident and self-assured. Mukhtar's lips curled as he listened and his mind returned to those sessions, the interrogations at Camp X-Ray. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he recalled being strapped to the narrow board, his feet raised and head lowered over a basin of foul water, and Captain Roberto's face hovering over his.

There had been four soldiers with Captain Roberto in that tiny dark room. The soldiers waited while Roberto leaned over Mukhtar and asked, “Cozy?” Then, smiling, he added, “Raise his feet more. We want him to feel the full effect.”

Roberto reached out his hand; a soldier placed a thin wet towel into it. He held it there, water dripping from its edges, over Mukhtar. Mukhtar felt the cold drops piercing his thin jumpsuit. He tried to suppress his emotions, but he could not. He was afraid and he had never felt fear like that. His eyes widened. Was he a coward? Had he always been a coward? No ... no, he must not show fear. Allah, calm my spirit!

“Now Mohammed, before I place this cloth over your face, you can tell me about your, shall we say adventures, and save on water. Or we can go ahead with this ... uh ... therapy, and you will tell us anyway.”

A scream was all that emerged from his gagged mouth. Against all his efforts of control, his body quivered and squirmed against the coarse bands that secured him, one over his forehead, others over his arms and legs, and still another holding his torso to the board.

Watching him, Roberto smirked. “Oh I forgot, you’re gagged. Well, fuck you, you shit, you’re going to get it anyway!” He placed the towel tightly around Mukhtar’s face, and motioned for one guard to hold it there while another dipped a pitcher into the foul pool and poured the contents over the cloth. Mukhtar screamed and gasped. His entire body strained against the bindings, his back arching off the board.

The captain raised his hand, and a soldier removed the towel from Mukhtar’s face. He spit out the sodden gag, gasping and choking, and stared in narrow-eyed defiance at the cherub face.

Mukhtar found himself still staring when he shuttered back to reality, prompted by the sound of the judge’s deep, mechanical voice. “Your witness, Mr. Hussein.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” his attorney said as he rose from his chair. Unlike the other lawyers for The Seven, all of them lawyers from the Center for Constitutional Rights, Hussein Rashid was Saudi. He was a portly man, fastidious in a black suit, who had a confident, almost arrogant air about him as he said, “Now Captain Roberto, you have testified that my client was responsible for planning the long list of attacks cataloged by the prosecution, is that correct?”

Mukhtar sat up in his chair, the thumbs of his clasped hands stroking the corners of his mouth to hide the growing grin. Rashid was a brilliant lawyer, but these were Mukhtar’s words. Rashid was only the messenger. He could feel the tempo grow as the captain replied, “Yes sir, that is correct.”

“Now, for the moment, let’s consider just one of those attacks. The 9/11 attacks. The attacks on the buildings known as the Twin Towers. You have testified that my client planned and funded these attacks, is that correct?”

“Sir, that is correct.”

“What is the basis for your testimony?”

“Sir, excuse me, sir?” Mukhtar was delighted at the hint of confusion in the captain’s voice.

“Were you in the room when the defendant made statements that would lead you to believe that he was planning a terrorist attack?”

“No sir. It’s based on the results I obtained from my interrogations, and on several classified documents we obtained that together linked him to the attack.”

Mukhtar’s eyes brightened. Excellent, excellent, nibble-nibble my fish.

“You more than just ‘linked’ him, did you not?”

“Yes sir. These documents indicated that he was the architect of the attack plan. He was also directing their activities, and providing funding to Mohamed Atta, Harwan al-Shehhi, Hani Hanjour, and the others involved in the attack.”

I did more than that. The lazy camel herders did nothing but drink beer and talk of flying ponderous planes.

Rashid walked back to his desk and picked up some documents sheathed in plastic. “Your Honor, I would like the witness to review the prosecution’s exhibit twenty-three. This is one of the alleged documents mentioned by Captain Roberto.” He handed the documents to the captain.

Mukhtar’s eyes met Rashid’s and flashed him a spurring nod of approval as he continued.

“Now, Captain, would you describe these documents for the court?”

“Yes sir.... Sir, these are e-mails from classified sources.”

Rashid smiled and shook his head, “No, I mean ... ah, perhaps it is the language. I meant, could you give a physical description of these documents?”

“Yes sir, I understand sir. They are hard copies of e-mails received at CENTCOM regarding the defendant’s activities. It consists of about thirty redacted lines--”

“Redacted?”

“Yes sir. The classified information is blacked out.”

“Can you read for me from whom this e-mail is?”

“No sir, I can’t. As I said, it’s classified, so it’s blacked out.”

“Ah, I see. Blacked out. Then perhaps, Captain, can you point to the line where the evidence could be read, if it wasn’t blacked out?”

Yes, yes, that's it. Of course he can't, the fool. Mukhtar's fist tightened on the arms of the chair. Go ahead, answer. Answer!

"No sir, I can ... I cannot."

"Come, come now Captain. You have been over these documents many times. You are very familiar with them, are you not?"

"Yes sir, that's ... that's true I guess."

"Then you should be able to point to the line where the incriminating statements were made."

Mukhtar could see that Roberto was nervous; beads of sweat were forming on his forehead and his tan uniform showed darkening under the armpits. He studied the first document, then, biting his lip, he tentatively pointed to it.

Mukhtar pulled down tightly on his mustache, suppressing a victorious cry, feeling the prosecution's arguments crumbling like clay.

"Your Honor, if it pleases the court, let it be recorded that the witness pointed to line five of the document," Rashid said. "Now Captain, to what action does this line five refer to specifically?"

"Sir, I don't recall sir."

"I see. Well, no matter."

Mukhtar nodded ever so slightly, signaling that Rashid should begin the next leg of the attack. "So now Captain, you have stated that what you learned from the defendant during interrogation led you to this document and others like it. Is that correct?"

"Yes sir, I believe so, sir."

"Ah, good. Now, these interrogations involved the use of some drugs, did they not?"

“Yes sir. Medically supervised drugs were administered to make the defendant more cooperative--”

“More cooperative, you say? You mean, willing to say anything to avoid further torture.”

Mukhtar’s eyes narrowed. He was pleased with Rashid, and now looked for the response he had hoped to hear.

The prosecuting attorney, Hamilton Blair, jumped to his feet. “Objection, Your Honor!”

“Sustained,” the judge said. “Mr. Rashid, you will refrain from such theatrics or I will find you in contempt. Captain, you do not have to respond.”

Mukhtar’s hope was fulfilled when temper replaced reason and Captain Roberto, incensed by the accusation, let fly. “Sir, the detainees at Gitmo had all received interrogation resistance training. Even in captivity, they were intent on fighting the United States. They considered themselves still in a combat situation, sir. They would piss on guards who got too close to the exercise yard fence, throw feces at them from their cells, and attempt suicide, as ways of fighting back. In the exercise yard, they organized attacks over a period of weeks or months. They’d say anything--meekly and promptly follow our directions, all to gain access to lower-security areas to pass on instructions for the attacks. Sir, they would then recant their testimony and return to their belligerency, so they’d be placed back in their original cells. Sir, these are combatants, hard men intent on continuing their jihad. The only way to get the truth was to use BDNF13 on them.”

“And this BDNF13, how did it make them more cooperative?”

“It enhanced their fears, sir.”

“Could you give us some examples, Captain?”

“Yes sir. They would become terrified of the dark. And a woman in a bikini would make them go screaming berserk. They’d try to climb the walls.” Roberto laughed and added, “Hell, I thought she was kind’a hot.”

His face unreadable, Rashid said, “And how do you think they felt?”

“Like the cowards they were, sir--”

Mukhtar attempted to jump from his chair, but the heavy hands of the guards restrained him.

“So in this state of mind,” Rashid continued, “when the detainees were in this state of mind, this is when you would get the answers you were seeking? When they were screaming and climbing the walls, as you put it.”

“Yes sir, that is correct.”

Mukhtar’s eyes locked with Rashid’s in a knowing stare, and then with deliberation in his movements, Rashid turned his attention from Roberto to the judge. “Your Honor, I apologize for this, but the document I showed Captain Roberto was not the prosecution’s exhibit twenty-three, but an e-mail I sent to my brother yesterday, and in which I blacked out most of the lines, as the government has done with their so-called documents of evidence.”

Ignoring gasps from Roberto and the entire courtroom, Rashid continued. “So, I submit Your Honor, if the government’s expert witness cannot identify the documents or their content, then how do we know they contain any incriminating evidence at all? Also, the evidence gathered during the interrogation of my client and others, as we have just heard, was gathered when they were in such a state of mind, they in fact were out of their minds. Your Honor, I submit to the court that unless the government reveals, in total, their classified information, there is no credible evidence against my client. Accordingly, Your Honor, I request the court drop all charges against my client.”

The prosecutor was on his feet. “Objection, Your Honor! Objection!”

Mukhtar greeted Rashid with a broad smile and embrace as he returned to the defense table. They had anticipated that the federal prosecutors would be adamant about proceeding with the trial, and in a quandary about releasing classified information, which could only help Mukhtar’s contemporaries. Mukhtar held Rashid silent as the prosecution ranted on. Finally, the judge, Nicholas Mauskopf, a staunch antiterrorism advocate, pounded his gavel and gave his decision. “I believe you make a valid point, Mr. Rashid. I will give the government seventy-two hours to decide what they want to do about these documents, and then I will rule on Mr. Rashid’s motion. This court is adjourned.”



## *Chapter 2*

Federal Prosecutor Hamilton Blair sat fidgeting with his tie on a leather sofa in the office of Frank McGuire, the Attorney General. McGuire was in animated conversation with the White House chief of staff and with each gesture his boss made, Blair became more anxious.

McGuire finally finished his conversation and came over to the settee area. Stressed from the phone call, his tone was sharp as he said, "Hamilton, this was quite a turn of events yesterday. This is not what we expected from Judge Mauskopf. You assured me ..." He held up his hands and in a softer tone said, "You assured me Mauskopf would favor our position of only supplying redacted documents for the public trial."

"Yes, Mauskopf was given full access to the actual e-mails. I mean he has all the clearances, and he knows we have the evidence, and ..."

"And?" McGuire's tone showed resurging stress.

"And he gave me every confidence--at least, my conversations with him two weeks ago gave me every confidence this would not be a problem. Not a problem as long as he had full access to the evidence, which ... which he has."

His patience stretched by the reply, McGuire quietly said, "Then what has happened?"

"The Saudi lawyer, and ..."

"And what, Hamilton?"

"When I met with him this morning he said he was going to announce his retirement."

"His retirement ... why? He was just appointed to the Superior Court."

“As he told me this morning, Judge Mauskopf has been diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer. He said he didn’t want to be remembered as the hand of a repressive government.”

“Hmm. Mortality and his legacy, is that it?”

“I believe so, yes sir, but I could talk to him and remind him--”

“How do you think he will rule?”

“He gave us advance notice. He will require the complete release of all classified information, or the withdrawal of all charges.”

“Nice of him. Well, we cannot release the documents. Admiral Reinhardt has already warned that to do so would devastatingly compromise the NSA’s ability to collect terrorist information in the Middle East.”

“So ... so what, how do we proceed?”

“That’s what I’ve just been discussing with the White House. We drop the charges and release The Seven. Since Judge Mauskopf will rule against us, you’ll inform him we will be re-filing our charges.”

“Re-filing? But what--”

“Never mind that. It’s just to buy us time. The Israelis owe us, particularly in their current crisis. So they won’t pay much attention when we transfer those seven detainees to the Gaza Strip. We’ll move them with only their clothes on their backs. No passports, no money, no ID of any sort. At the same time, you’ll provide the Israeli Defense Force with pictures, fingerprints, DNA, and anything else in your files on these men. The Strip is a walled compound. Without ID, these men will be going nowhere.”

McGuire chuckled. “I’m sure the IDF will help make sure of that.”

Hamilton didn’t respond, but sat staring blankly at his coffee cup.

“You have a problem with that, Hamilton?”

“No, I, uh ... and the re-filings?”

“Wait six months, and then quietly drop the charges. If anyone asks, tell them they’ve been returned to the country of their ... uh, choice.”

McGuire stood and extended his hand to Hamilton. “We’re done then.”

Still feeling the shock of what he’d just been instructed to do, Hamilton shook his hand and turned to leave.

“Oh, one more thing, Hamilton.”

Hamilton turned around.

“Make sure your doctor at Camp X-Ray gives the detainees an extra dose of that BDNF13 compound just before they leave. And make it clear to them what they can expect if we suspect they’re causing any more trouble.”

Hamilton raised his eyebrows, but said nothing as he nodded. As he walked the highly polished corridors of the Department of Justice building, he reflected on his many interrogation sessions. For most of the detainees at Gitmo, a threat to return them to Camp X-Ray would be enough to keep them from any further visions of jihad.

All except one. Judge Mauskopf’s ruling would provide the answer on that one.

## ***Chapter 3***

Amirrah was chewing her lip, feeling on edge. She was in a hotel suite turned into an electronic surveillance hub monitoring a conference center. This was her first high profile assignment. *Ehud said I should be careful of what I asked him for. Now you got the job, don't screw it up Amirrah*, she reminded herself. Amirrah was the roving agent responsible for seeing the total picture. She scanned the line of ten monitors and her stomach knotted as her eye caught an unexpected image. "David, zoom in on the first floor elevator lobby, that guy in the traditional Arab garb, the blue thoub, I don't recall his photo on the briefing board this morning." David typed some keys and zoomed in but the elevator doors closed quickly, allowing only a glimpse of the man's face. "Damn." Amirrah said under her breath. They switched to the elevator's camera, but could only see the back of a shumagg wrapped around his head. Her only thought was that he was a person of interest that she remembered from her repetitious study of the daily threat bulletins. She drew her clock and headed for the elevator lobby outside the ballroom.

American born, Amirrah Kohen had spent her day at Jerusalem's King David Hotel, briefing-in on the security for the dinner hosted by the negotiating team of the Palestine National Authority, the Palestine Nation Planning Authority. They had been meeting with their Israeli counterparts to negotiate the formation of an independent Palestinian state. It was a process started in good faith and now stalled by decades of accumulated distrust and bitterness. Doctor Husam Khalid had convinced the PNA chairman, that a dinner party, a social event to get to know each other on a deeper level, would help get the negotiations moving again. The guest list included the PNA foreign minister and negotiating staff, and the Israeli negotiating team from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, known as the Commission for Infrastructure Transition. Hamas weakened by years of

strife, had not been invited, but had threatened to attack the social event. Which is why, Amirrah found herself rushing towards the elevator lobby, she was part of a Mossad team put in place to see that Hamas couldn't carry out its threat.

On her way out of the surveillance center, Amirrah picked up another agent and they both stood outside the elevator, braced and guns drawn, watching the elevator's indicator illuminate its progress through the array of floor numbers above the door. They were on the twelfth floor, outside the hotel's largest and most ornate conference room. Amirrah had only recently qualified for Eilath, the anti-terrorism division of Mossad, and was at her first assignment at the Mossad detachment in Gaza, when she heard they were putting together a security team to supplement the agents in Jerusalem. As one of the few female agents, she had insisted on being included, and had been surprised how easily her supervisor, Ehud, had agreed.

The eleventh floor indicator lit. "Safety's off!" Amirrah said. The twelfth floor indicator lit, and the doors opened. "Freeze!" They shouted. Then Amirrah realized why the image had caught her attention, and lowered her weapon. "Jacob?"

The familiar face resting on athletic shoulders and framed by a cascade of curly black hair, smiled broadly. "Amirrah? I ... can I get off now?"

Amirrah motioned for him to exit the elevator. She hadn't seen Jacob since she was nineteen in Rafah. He had abruptly left without explanation, a crushing ending to her first real love affair, that left her hurt and angry. Those feelings she thought she had put behind her, but now her head and heart were saying otherwise. Feeling conflicting emotions, she tried to keep an official tone.

Amirrah waved off the other agent. "It's all right, I know him."

“What are you doing here Jacob? And why aren’t you wearing your credentials?”

Jacob gave a thin smile, and reached inside his thoub and pulled his security badge into view, identifying him as a PNPA staff member.

“Sorry, I don’t like this thing dangling, and the high neck of the thoub, makes it awkward.”

Holstering her Glock, she said, “Not displaying your credentials could be a lot more than just awkward, it could get you shot.”

Jacob came alongside Amirrah. “I’m sorry, I will be more careful.”

Nodding he added, “This is an unexpected surprise, but it’s great to see you here, it’s been such a long time.”

If they had met on the street or at a cafe, it would be different. A slap in the face, a hug, or perhaps a kiss, depending which emotion won out, but now she knew she had to be all about business. “Was it? I barely remember it, and we were hardly more than kids back then. But here and now I’m Mossad security, and you haven’t answered my question: What are you doing here?”

Jacob frowned and backed away. “I’m not sure really. Jaad-di, my grandfather, Husam, is organizing this and asked me to help with the arrangements, right now I was going to check the place settings at the main table, but I’m sure the hotel staff has done that already.”

“Well, go ahead and do your job, but don’t linger in the halls. I have to get back to security control.”

They parted and Amirrah resumed her duties scanning the monitors. The guests filtered into the room, Doctor Husam Khalid arrived. He was the principal negotiator for the nationhood talks, and during dinner he gave a speech poking fun at his delegation. Eli Yishai the Israeli foreign minister surprised everyone by giving a similar speech about his delegation. That seemed to lighten the mood, and after the main courses there was a great

deal of movement from table to table as the attendees consulted and conspired. After four hours of scanning the wall of monitors, watching delegates move from table to table, Amirrah felt she had walked five miles by the time the social event finally dwindled to a close.

Amirrah and the other agents were relaxing in the control room, enjoying some pastry and coffee, when Amirrah noticed Jacob pacing aimlessly in front of the conference room entrance. She smirked. *He looks like a lost school boy.* She tried to ignore him, but knew he was deliberately drawing attention to himself. Deciding to talk to him and get him to leave before an agent with an attitude responded and real trouble developed, she snatched some pastries and left for the ball room entrance.

Amirrah approached Jacob, extending a plate with several pastries on it. "You look lost, would you like some rugelach?"

Jacob smiled. "Some ruge ...rugelach?"

"It means little twists, they're pastries."

Jacob nodded and after taking a bite, said, "It's good, very good, thank you. I wasn't expecting this, but I was hoping you were still watching ... uh, your monitors."

Amirrah returned his smile. "I know, and I just came to say good-bye. So good-bye Jacob, and you will have to clear this area. Members of the delegation are staying the night, and the agent in charge wants to secure this floor."

"Amirrah can we talk? Is there someplace we can talk for a few minutes?"

Amirrah grimaced. She didn't want to open her old wound any more than it already was. "Jacob ... I probably shouldn't have come out here. It was good to see you, but the past is best left there, and so it's still just good-bye."

Amirrah turned to leave, but immediately ran into a gray-haired man in formal Arab garb, his blue thoub billowing around her. “Oh, excuse me ... oh, doctor Khalid.”

Doctor Husam Khalid was smiling broadly, and reached out for Amirrah’s hands. He was a tall man, unbowed by the ravages of his seventy years, and had a Vandyke beard that accented his disarming smile. “Amirrah, my dear. Look at you, you have grown into a beautiful woman, it is so good to see you again. I see you have found Jacob.”

Doctor Khalid still had a hold of her hands. Amirrah said, “Yes we met, and we were just saying our good-byes, I still have some duties to attend to.” She slipped from doctor Khalid gentle grasp, and then added, “Congratulations on your dinner, it looked quite successful.”

Husam held his broad smile. “Ah, yes. You were watching weren’t you? Why don’t you come to my suite? We can visit. I am sure you two have a lot to catch up on.”

Amirrah shook her head. “No, I’m ... I’m really sorry, but I must get back to the control ...”

Husam held up his hand. “You two should at least settle your parting so many years ago. Come, my suite is just down the hall.”

Amirrah gave a smile of surrender, and she walked the short distance down the hall to doctor Khalid’s suite, sharing awkward glances with Jacob. At the room a security guard opened the door, and as they entered, an agitated aid came running after them and called excitedly to Husam. “You two, go on in.” Husam said, “talk ... talk to each other. I must attend to another matter, but I will be back in a minute.” Husam took a step then leaned back to Amirrah. “I most of all want to hear how you ended up in the Mossad, must be quite a story.” Then he gave her a wink, and joined his agitated aid.



Amirrah and Jacob went into the room and both sat in the reception area facing each other on a sofa. Jacob reached for her hand, but Amirrah pulled away. “I missed you. I know it has been six years, but I think about you all the time.”

Amirrah wondered what his real agenda was, because she didn’t believe Jacob. “That’s hard to believe. I sent letters to your grandfather for you, but I never heard back.”

Jacob shook his head. “It is more complicated than that.”

Now Amirrah was irritated, it was a line she had heard all too often. “Oh, is that what you say when you dump your girlfriend? I thought we were serious, we were talking about living together as soon as we could, if I recall.”

“My uncle Ramiz insisted I obey the Sharia, and go with him. Immediately. Jaad-di resisted, but after my uncle and Jaad-di talked, grandfather seemed to change his mind, and said it would be for the best.”

Amirrah folded her arms. She wasn’t buying it. “And yet here we are, in Jaad-di’s suite.”

Jacob stood, turned for the door, but stopped and added. “My uncle was a senior officer in Hamas then. My father was a Muslim as you know. My uncle insisted I had to convert to Islam and be educated in the Quran, without Jaad-di I had no means of support, and I had no choice. After a few years, your Mossad forced uncle Ramiz out of Israel and Palestine. I started a new life with Jaad-di. What I said about you always being on my mind is true. I wanted to talk to you, so that you would know it was not my choice to leave you, or to ignore your letters.”

Amirrah stood, gave a shake to her head, and said, “If you really loved me you would have found a way. And as far as your faith, what about your mother. You should have been true to her. She was an Israeli, so you also are an Israeli, and you should have been faithful to your Jewish ancestry

and religion. That would have brought us closer. Now I have to agree with you. It is complicated.”

Jacob faced her, looked into her eyes. “I’m sorry. I know I hurt you, it wasn’t the right decision, and I know now, more than ever, that I love you. But if you want to part, here and now, I understand.”

Amirrah felt mesmerized by his deep blue eyes. She didn’t understand it, and couldn’t stop herself when her heart won. She reached up to his neck, pulled him to her, and gave him a long probing kiss.

“Jacob Khalid, you are mine now, and don’t leave me ever again. Remember, I am Mossad and I will find you.”

## *Chapter 4*

Dr. Aharon Adler, tall and slim with silver hair sprouting from under a black yarmulke, sat uncomfortably in the bright plastic seats at JFK, his face hidden behind dark wraparound glasses. The bright July sun beamed through the windows and warmed him, but his spirit remained dark. Indeed, his future seemed beyond bleak, and a hollow in the pit of his stomach was all that was left of the last ten years of his life.

Aharon felt someone staring at him. The man across the aisle in a facing row of seats flapped his paper, then stared intently at an unseen corner.

What has happened to me? I had a good reputation. A researcher for the Army, what was wrong with that? I did my job. Now I'm a pariah--

"Excuse me? Aren't you famous?"

Aharon dropped his head to one side and gave a weak smile. *Oh God, here we go again.* Then, clenching his eyes shut, he subtly shook his head and admonished himself. *Americans! They are so free with Your Name. Elohim, forgive me for thinking your name.* "No, no, please, I'm not. You must be mistaken."

The questioner gave a knowing grin. "Okay, I understand. But you are, ya know ... your picture is right here in the paper. You're that Army guy. Boy, the Civil Liberties Union sure doesn't like you!"

Aharon waved his hand in surrender, then nodded and mouthed a yes.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I'm retired Army intel myself. I was at Camp X-Ray in ninety-one."

Aharon looked away, wanting anything but a chat with this man. But he had to say something. "Ten years, two-thousand and five. I was a research scientist."

“Outstanding. Hey, do you know anything about that BNDF stuff?”

Aharon’s eyes snapped to meet the man. “The what?”

“The ...” The man fumbled with his paper, then raised it up. “The brain-derived neurotropic factor, that brain protein?”

“Oh, you mean B, D, N, F.”

“Yes, yes, that it,” the man said and chuckled. “Boy, old age, can’t keep anything straight.”

Aharon pursed his lips. He was anxious and didn’t want to say anything, but yet now, found himself yearning for even this small recognition. “Yes, I ... I developed a derivative of it, ‘BDNF13’ I called it. In combination with sodium pentothal it was very effective.”

“Wow, no kidding. That’s outstanding.”

“Took me years to develop. Psychologically it was very painful.”

“An iron maiden.”

Aharon shook his head, confused. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m a medieval history buff. That’s a torture device, like a cage. It contorted their bodies where they didn’t want to go. Sort of like your drug.”

“Yes, I see. A psychological iron maiden, pushing the mind where it didn’t want to go.” Aharon gave a nervous laugh, “Yes, I guess you could say that.”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll put your discovery to good use again.”

“Oh, no. I think it has all been destroyed, all my research, gone, all for naught.”

“Really? They didn’t keep any of the stuff? Your research papers, nothing?”

Aharon was feeling more depressed by the minute, but talking about it somehow felt good. “No, nothing. It was too big of a liability for the government, they said. They highly classified it or destroyed it, I ... I don’t know.”

“That’s a shame. I mean, that had to be years of research. Did you publish any papers about it?”

“No. Never.”

“Well your family must have been proud.”

“No. I couldn’t tell my wife.”

“I see,” said the man, nodding as if agreeing and understanding Aharon’s pain.

“She left me. With all the ... the media, they were relentless. We wanted to raise a family. At least I did. But we’re divorced. It’s over. All of it is over.”

“Wow, unbelievable man! I mean, you were practically a patriot. To end up with nothing? That’s painful.” The man folded his paper. “But you have your notes, right? A trophy? A sample? You know a keepsake?”

Perspiration emerged from every pore in his body; a hammer of queasiness hit his gut. *He said he’d worked for the government. I was so careful, but ... do they know about it?* In May, it had all ended in a day. His data, his serum, and his papers, all confiscated. But they had miscalculated. They’d also wanted the last of the detainees, The Seven, to be medicated one more time, so Aharon bargained and won guarantees to preserve his data and the records of his experiments. He had spent the last six weeks documenting his work, then found out their promise was empty. They took everything, they said for the archives. They took everything, in fact, except the thumb drive now hidden in the heel of his shoe.

Though covered behind his glasses, Aharon couldn't keep his eyes from widening. He struggled for control. Slowly he shook his head and weakly managed, "No, no I kept nothing. That would be against the law, and I ... I have done nothing wrong, why should I start now?"

The man got up as another approached. That is when Aharon noticed that they were dressed nearly identically. The man smiled and said, "It was good talking to you, Doctor, enjoy your flight to Israel." Then with a nod to the second man, both left.

Aharon sat. He sat staring into the blinding sun beaming through the windows, feeling like a speeding truck had just brushed his clothing. *I'm not at the gate. How did he know I was going to Israel?*

No more talking. To anyone, for any reason. Now he was more eager than ever to be out of the United States and safely home.

The contents of the thumb drive were all he had. It was enough. He would use it for a new area of behavioral research, he would establish a behavioral clinic for children at Rambam. He'd already secured a position there, he loved children, and it was a rewarding area of research: an area where every achievement was a miracle, and he would use his serum for good.

He adjusted his yarmulke, let out a long breath and looked around, his thoughts shifting to finding somewhere he could calm his nerves before his El Al flight. When he was tense before, he'd open a spreadsheet and analyze his data. That was out of the question right now. But anywhere he could close his eyes and his mind could drift back would do.

The Gate Way Pub caught his eye, and he fought his way across a torrent of people surging through the concourse. At a corner table, he ordered a double Glenlivet, and then opened his burgundy leather briefcase, retrieving his new-hire packet of paperwork. He took a sip of his scotch and leaned back in the high, padded booth.

The spreadsheets wouldn't leave his mind, though. Every one of them documented dosage, treatments, and the reactions and personalities of each subject. How hard they were, how arrogant, but it didn't matter. In the end they all had cooperated, petrified with terror, willing to say anything, admit to anything. His mind ran down the list of names, stopping at his favorite, Mukhtar Sheik Mohammed. Aharon had found the right combination of his drug, and Mukhtar told them everything without being aware of what he'd said. Not aware until later, much later, when he realized he had divulged many al-Qaeda secrets, including the key to finding Osama bin Laden.

A coat brushed against his table, startling him from his reverie. He gave a forced smile and faint nod to his fellow traveler who sat down at the table next to him. Taking another sip of his drink to fortify himself, Aharon opened the folder and flipped through the sheaf of employment papers, annoyed by the repetitious fields of information required for many of the pages. After completing only the first page, the flat-screened television monitor over the bar caught his attention. One side of a split screen showed a group of men in boisterous disarray. The gathering was, he realized, the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset. On the other side of the split, the commentator was speaking excitedly of breaking news.

\* \* \*

An hour before, the Israeli Prime Minister announced that the Knesset would convene an emergency session to convene at four PM Israeli time. Media reporters and embassy representatives from every nation packed the visitor gallery. Knesset members were flowing into the great hall. The Speaker entered from a door on the left side of the hall, while the members of the Labor Party, which formed the largest group, entered in animated conversation from the right side of the hall. The prime minister, Isaac Noss, led this group, followed by his ministers, and they took their seats at

a center table. From the left of the hall, Shimon Weizmann led the next-largest parliamentary group, the Zionist Party, who entered in hushed conversation and took their seats on the left of the hall. Knesset members of other minor parties filled in from the rear doors.

The Speaker gaveled the session into order precisely at four PM. The first words he spoke after the gavel's echoes abated were, "Mr. Weizmann had petitioned me to add, as an urgent motion for the agenda, a question regarding the negotiations for a Palestinian state. Mr. Noss, tell me, who will be answering for the government?"

Isaac Noss rose from his seat at the center of the government's table. "Mr. Speaker, I will address the question."

"Very well," said the Speaker, "I will summarize the issue. Negotiations for the Palestinian nation have yielded one government concession after another, and based on the latest report from the prime minister's office, cannot be concluded, barring any further Arab demands, for another three weeks."

From the floor, someone in the opposition shouted, "Three weeks? We cannot wait three weeks! We have no oil, our nation is at a standstill!"

Noss responded, saying, "We are all suffering, but the Arab League has demanded that all Israeli settlements be vacated from Samaria and Judea, before they will sign the agreement. We have requested an easing of the oil boycott, and the negotiating team promised they would address this with the OPEC nations."

"Mr. Speaker."

The Speaker turned to Noss. "Mr. Noss, will you yield to Mr. Weizmann?"

Noss nodded and sat down while Shimon Weizmann stood and walked to the Speaker's podium. "Six months. For six months, we have suffered



with this boycott to blackmail us. First, it was a matter of land, then the people as well. Forced to remove our citizens from their homes on the West Bank, we are on the verge of giving up all to the Palestinians--all of Samaria, all of Judea.

“Our honor has been lost, and if this treaty is agreed, we are powerless to restore the lands of ancient Israel. Without these sacred lands, the lands of Abraham and the House of David, from the Euphrates to the Nile, we cannot re-consecrate our Covenant with Elohim. We will never be able to achieve the greatness for our nation--greatness promised, greatness so that we may be the source of a multitude of nations. We must not, and cannot, agree to the treaty as it stands!”

The left of the great hall erupted in shouts and cheers of affirmation, but even some on the right, in Noss’ own party, responded.

“Concessions and more concessions are all that we have done,” one member shouted. “Where is our resolve, where is our chutzpa? We have the best armed forces in the Middle East, it is time we bared our teeth.”

The hall again erupted in cheers and the pounding of desks.

“We must stop squandering our strategic reserves,” another strident voice proclaimed. “And we must, above all, not give in to the Arab League’s demands for these territories! We must find new sources for the crude oil that we need, to relieve the suffering of our citizens. If it is forced upon us, if we must, we should take the oil from our OPEC neighbors, such as Libya and Iraq and Kuwait...!”

The room exploded in shouts and calls to speak. Isaac Noss dropped his head into his hands as he felt his government collapsing.

\* \* \*

Totally absorbed by the breaking news, Aharon and the man beside him watched the large screen above the bartender. “In Israel today,” the

announcer was saying, “the Labor Party government of Isaac Noss fell on a no-confidence vote in the Knesset. This puts a cloud over the negotiations being held at Camp David for a new Palestinian nation, and may escalate the economic crises Israel has had to endure for the past two years. A lasting peace based on a free and independent Palestinian nation has long been a centerpiece of Prime Minister Noss and his government. Shimon Weizmann, great-grandson of Chaim Weizmann and leader of the RZO, the Revisionist Zionist Organization, forced the Knesset vote early this morning.”

Aharon looked back down at his paperwork. “Well, this is the start of it,” he said under his breath.

“It’s about time the Knesset came to its senses,” the traveler next to Aharon said, still looking up at the monitor.

Aharon shook his head and looked over at him. “I beg your pardon. I often talk to myself when I work.”

“Oh, I see. I saw your yarmulke, and thought you ...”

Aharon then noticed the well-dressed traveler was also wearing a yarmulke, and an Israeli flag on his lapel. “Oh, yes, you’re an Israeli also. But I hardly know anything about politics.” He returned his attention to his papers.

“The country is a mess, don’t you think?”

Aharon bunched his lips in frustration, removed his glasses. “No ... I guess ... uh, I haven’t been back for two years, and *umm* ... my work keeps me very busy.”

“Oh, I see. Well let me tell you, everything is bad. No oil, and no gas, which causes shortages of everything. In Tel Aviv, there are lines for bread and fish, and for gas, some people wait days for a few gallons ... it’s appalling.”

Aharon studied the traveler, took in a man in his late thirties possessing a perfectly trimmed, full head of hair, smooth, soft-looking hands, and a Rolex that peeked out from under one shirt cuff. "Gas delays? It doesn't seem you would be bothered by such inconveniences."

A slight smile crossed the man's face. "Spoken like a scientist or a reporter." He extended a hand to Aharon. "I'm Benjamin Neeman ... Benny, by the way."

Shaking his hand, Aharon replied, "No reporter here. I am Doctor Aharon Adler, biochem-- *umm* researcher, that sort of thing. Benny, glad to meet you." Smiling broadly and shaking his head, he added, "I always explain, because when people hear 'doctor' they--"

"Yes, I understand. You flying into Arafat International, then?"

"No, Tel Aviv. My new home is in Haifa. I'll be living with my sister ... but why do you fly to Arafat? Do you live in Gaza?"

"No, in Tel Aviv. But there are some things I do have to contend with, like gas lines. There are no lines in Gaza. They have their own refinery and fewer cars, I think is the reason."

Aharon nodded. "That makes for a long trip then."

"No, just ten hours, I am provided a private jet, and-- Oh, here are my pilots now."

Aharon looked toward the bar's concourse opening. Two uniformed officers approached. *Damn! Have I been talking to a government investigator again? Did I say anything? Are they here to arrest me?* Aharon's heart was pounding so hard he was sure they could hear it.

"Well, I see the air force has arrived," Benny said with a grin. "Only kidding, these are my pilots. Sorry to interrupt your work, perhaps we shall meet again in Tel Aviv."

Aharon only nodded in response, and allowed a slight grin and a bare raising of his hand as they departed the pub. Once out of sight his head fell into his hands; beads of sweat blossomed on his brow. *I've been such a fool. I should have gotten rid of the files. Why am I hanging on to them?*

He reached out, took one of the bar napkins from a stack and wiped his face, shaking the thoughts from his head. He had started at Rambam Hospital, and he was going back. Equally as certain, he would be able to apply his research to a more noble cause there. He looked at his watch; his flight would board soon, placing him out of danger at last. Closing his briefcase, he prepared to leave. Completing his paperwork on the plane might not be a tiresome chore after all.

## *Chapter 5*

“*Assalamu alaikum* (Allah’s grace be upon you),” Mukhtar said as he approached three men seated at a linen-covered table. The El-Helou Hotel, one of Gaza’s tallest and finest, took great care to provide its visitors every comfort. Arbors covered in wisteria shaded the three from the just-waking sun. All three wore black suits, white shirts with collars loose. Two of them, eyes hidden by dark glasses, sat at either side of the third, who never looked up from his bagels and lox. As Mukhtar closed on the table, the two stood and inserted themselves between him and the diner. The closest man, muscles barely contained beneath his suit, towered over him, produced a wand and swept Mukhtar’s fleshy torso. Then he nodded, pressed one hand to his earbud and spoke into a microphone on his wrist while the other man pulled a chair out and extended a hand, gesturing for Mukhtar to sit. The two then retired to the rooftop garden a short distance away. Moments later, food and a tea service sat on a cart beside the table. The diner again ate with gusto; by his silence and that he remained standing, Mukhtar declined.

The diner was a trim man, short silver-gray hair with a face seemingly already carved in stone, lacking in any hint of emotion. Without raising his eyes from his food he said, “It is good to see you again after such a long absence. If you won’t eat, at least have some tea.”

Mukhtar wrestled himself into a chair and poured a cup of tea, engulfing the delicate cup with his large hands. The diner finally looked up at the paunchy and balding Mukhtar, and said, “I find it difficult to believe, my friend, that you could survive the desert, but yet you are here.”

Mukhtar scanned the horizon and with a wave of his hand said, “It was not by my efforts that I survived, but through the hand of Allah.” He stared, unseeing, at the sun perched on a distant building, and the luxurious setting and the diner disappeared.

A hood covered his head, and he shivered in the induced darkness of the ... morning? Afternoon? He didn't know, nor would he ever. Seated with his hands restrained behind his back, something was thrashing him about like meat in a giant blender. *They are going to eat me, eat me alive, nibble by nibble.* He heard the others of The Seven; they were moaning in agony. He listened and realized he was part of the chorus, moaning in abject terror of the darkness, in dread of the thumping *whump, whump* of the eating machine.

From somewhere distant he heard a shriek, then more and again the new chorus grew, and each new scream came closer. His hood was yanked from his head, and he screamed as the face of an insect-man appeared inches from him. The creature's head had a blunted horn in the middle of his forehead above huge glossy-black eyes, and a thin wire-like mandible appeared in front of its mouth. Now Mukhtar could see that the eating machine, a large metal box, was filled with The Seven, and many, so many of the insect-men.

The machine was falling, but the insect-men didn't seem to care. One yelled, "All right, you roaches, it's time to run to your holes."

Another insect, larger than the other one, threw open a door. The box stopped pitching now, but a howling wind came through the opening. *It must be the opening to their nest*, Mukhtar's mind shrieked at him. *We are food. Food for the queen.*

Mukhtar was the farthest away as the insects grabbed each of The Seven, released their bindings and tossed them, screaming, into the wind. Mukhtar was shivering with terror, his gray clothing soaked in sweat, when two of the insects grabbed him. "No, no ... please no, I am not food!"

They released his hands and his legs, which he hadn't realized were also bound. Mukhtar grabbed one of the men, shouted, "No! Stop! I am very clever, I can help you. I can get you many more men for your food."

The larger insect-man screamed over the howling, “Throw that fucking crazy out, now! Now!” But Mukhtar was also strong, and he hugged the sides of the doorway. He looked down. Below was a swirling tempest of brown grit. He screamed again and again, then his arms were pried from their desperate embrace of the doorway and he was thrown, legs flying over his head, into the tempest. He tumbled, screaming and grasping for anything to cling to, then landed with a loud crack and sharp thrust of pain like some unseen jaw biting his leg.

The whumping sound of the insect’s machine faded, the tempest calmed, and the brown grit settled. His leg twisted under him, his heel staring back at his face, as he viewed the contortion in horror. The intense pain cleared his mind. He looked about. He lay in a desert. The others were scattered around him, sitting and holding their heads or wandering in tight circles, yelling entreaties to Allah. In the distance was what looked like a medieval castle, a great high wall with two minaret-like towers.

The uncertain quiet was broken when one of The Seven yelled, “They’re coming back!” Mukhtar heard the whumping and turned to face it, saw it to be a banana-shaped black beast, no, it was a helicopter, and quickly approaching, skimming the desert dunes.

It swept the earth close to the men, a brown blizzard terrifying The Seven, who ran yelling in mindless circles. He watched as repeatedly the black beast swept its swirling cloud like some giant hand, herding them closer and closer to the wall. They ran in mad panic toward the wall, darting left and right as if looking for some welcoming portal to hide them. That’s when he saw the minarets open, like the petals of a giant flower.

“Look out! Come back!” he screamed, but it was too late: Guns emerged from the minarets and laid down a deluge of lead.

He closed his eyes and rested his head on a clump of desert grass, and woke, his vision blurry, to someone calling him, “Ramiz, Uncle Ramiz.” It

was good to hear that name. It was the name he used in his homeland; he must be in Gaza.

“Ramiz, are you all right?”

The sun had moved off its perch, and his drifting mind returned. He took a tentative sip of the hot tea and said, “Yes General I am fine, Ramiz Ajam Mohammed is fine,” and with a nod acknowledged the gift of his host.

“I want you to understand, I know that’s not your real name,” said the diner.

“I understand, my general.”

“Your name is of no consequence to me. What is important to me is the mind that hides behind such a cherubic face.”

Ramiz chuckled and poured himself more tea.

“Do not feign modesty. You have the mind of the fox, you have orchestrated some of the bloodiest terrorist attacks of the nineties. Some of your greatest successes have been against your own people. But then, that is my only interest ... results. And how is your son Moussa doing in the States?”

“He is eager to do that for which he has been trained.”

The diner smiled and blotted his lips with an embroidered napkin. “So beautiful is the morning, Ramiz.” Smiling, he raised his arms, embracing the vista. Both men gazed out over Gaza City. Now a quiet city, its buildings formed a panorama looking more like a child’s scattered blocks than an organized metropolis. The diner lowered his arms and leaned forward. “We have traveled a long journey, my friend. You have done many things for me for which I am truly grateful.”

“Yes, we have been very fortunate. And by Allah’s hand, your rivals not so fortunate.”



“You have recovered, then, from your Cuban adventure?”

“General Mashaal, that was a very painful experience, but yes, I am better. With your help, my recovery will one day be complete.”

The diner was not really a general; even his security team didn’t know his identity, only that he was an Israeli VIP whom they’d picked up at Arafat International. “General Mashaal” was an alias, its roots from the first day he and Ramiz met some twenty years earlier.

Ramiz slowly rolled his teacup between his hands. “All your life, you have worked to reach the ultimate position of power. It is close at hand, but could quickly slip away. The new government has made many promises, but with so many problems, what are they going to do?”

The diner sat back in his chair. “We are not giving up the West Bank, I promise you that. Without those lands, the Covenant cannot be restored.”

“Those lands are also holy Muslim lands, conquered by the ancients,” Ramiz said. “The Palestinians will never let them go.”

“We know all this! The Knesset has debated this many times. What is it to a mercenary like you?”

Ramiz smiled. “To me, the land means nothing. The Palestinians even less. They are dogs that need to be kicked so they understand their place.”

“And why are we meeting?”

With a wave of his hand, Ramiz began his pitch. “The Labor Party was forced to negotiate for one reason and one reason only.”

The diner shook his head and furrowed his brow in a look of irritation. “Yes, yes ... our oil. Once the Russians joined the boycott, and the Americans abandoned us, we had no choice. The conservation measures, which we thought were severe, were not enough. Now, even our military is struggling to continue everyday operations.”

“I have a solution for you, my general.”

The diner laughed. “You? *You* have a solution?” He covered his mouth with his napkin, then, seeing growing anger in Ramiz’s eyes, composed himself. “And what would that solution be?”

Before Ramiz could answer, he grabbed the lapel of Ramiz’s jacket. “And do not toy with me. I could have my men hold you over the side of the building with your entrails dangling, and no one would dare lift a finger to help you.”

“Of course you could, but I have not come here to play games. The Americans betrayed me also.”

The diner released him. Ramiz straightened his coat and continued. “They have humiliated me in front of women, my Muslim brothers, and Allah. They must pay for turning me into a coward, for their torture. I will exact my revenge.”

A waiter came to refresh their water and replace the tea. Ramiz looked around; the two security guards remained stone lions at the entrance. The sun had burned off the morning clouds, and seemed focused on their table. He waited until the server left to say, “Once it is started, it must be finished. It must be completed.”

Ramiz paused to add strength to his words. The diner slowly shook his head from side to side, then with an open-palm wave of his hand, signaled agreement.

“Good,” Ramiz said. “The Arab League, indeed the world, has aligned themselves with the plight of the Palestinians. The National Authority has subdued Hamas, the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades are little more than crossing guards for schoolchildren. That is what the world thinks. But what if Hamas really were the Mafia, the SS, al-Qaeda, all rolled into one?”

“What kind of a fairytale are you spinning?”

“ Hamas is stealing oil from you.”

The diner sat back, eyes narrowed at Ramiz, looking for any hint of his intentions. Without warning, he leaned into Ramiz’s face, his challenge a hoarse whisper. “How could they possibly be stealing anything from us? We have a ten-meter wall all around the Gaza Strip *and* the PNA states in the West Bank.” He chuckled with bitterness. “The PNA. Your Palestinian National Authority. What a joke!”

A smirk on his face, Ramiz stared into his eyes, unblinking. The diner realized Ramiz was coldly serious, fidgeted with the tablecloth, and like a covered pot held to the fire, boiled over. He pounded the table with his fist, demanded, “How do you *know* these things?”

“Because I am the thief.”

The diner choked on his own saliva. “You will tell us where, you will tell us how, every detail. Have you forgotten? The Mossad are not restrained as to how they get information, as the Americans were.”

Ramiz sat unfazed. “I was water boarded by the Americans one hundred and eighty times. Every Wednesday I received my injection that made me dig my nails into the concrete and climb the walls in terror of the smallest ant. I told them nothing. What could your Mossad do? How much time do you have? In two weeks, your military will not be able to run their tanks for more than a day.... Your planes will not be able to fly. You will be naked in front of your Arab neighbors. Iran and Syria will be circling like vultures to pick over your carcass. You must sign the nationhood agreement with the PNA this week, and your government will be over before it starts.”

“Much of what you say is true, Ramiz, but I don’t think you know everything.” The diner blotted his forehead with his napkin and took a sip

of his water, his eyes still locked onto Ramiz. “The sun is getting very hot.”

Ramiz said nothing, but smiled in amusement as he pushed back and slowly lifted his jacket lapel, exposing the inside, making sure the security guards noticed. He removed two envelopes, put one on the table and slid it forward to the diner, who opened it. As he read, his hand covered his mouth and his face reddened. “This is your plan?” He tossed the papers back across the table to Ramiz. “I cannot do this. They will compare me to Hitler.”

“You will not be doing this. I am the hand of Allah. To the world, it will be Hamas and the Palestinians. Every action you take, a prudent and necessary response. Your actions justified, as an act by the angel of righteousness against the demonic. No one will listen to the cries of the Palestinians again. You will have a free hand. You will be remembered as one of the great elders of Israel, as the one who brought Israel back into the Covenant.”

Ramiz watched as the diner’s eyes darted about blankly. His politician mind is calculating the possible outcomes of what I’ve said, but at least now he understands why I insisted on meeting here.

The diner picked up the papers once more and leafed through the corner-stapled packet. “How much time?”

“Four weeks. No more, no less.”

“Four weeks, but you are correct: We only have two weeks of oil reserves remaining, we still don’t have enough time.”

Ramiz smiled, held up the second envelope and tapped it with his ring finger.

“How much?”

“Twenty million US dollars in cash. Here Monday. Remember, it is all the way or nothing. Any second thoughts along the way will bring disaster for both of us.”

The diner nodded, and Ramiz slid the second envelope across the table. He opened it and read the second document. A broad teeth-baring smile crossed the diner’s face. He chuckled, then he roared in laughter, stomping his feet in delight. “This is good, Ramiz. I have to admit that I thought perhaps ...” With a wave of his hand and shaking his head, he finished what he didn’t speak. As he rose he said, “It is done then.”

The two men embraced, and the diner said, “Shalom, my friend.”

Ramiz whispered into his ear, “And congratulations on your election, Mr. Prime Minister.”

## ***Chapter 6***

Shimon Weizmann watched from his fifth-floor office window as a long stream of silver sedans crept through gates to the front portico. His security chief entered the room. "Congratulations Mr. Prime Minister, it is a great day for you today, my staff and I wish you and your new government the very best."

"Thank you, thank you very much, Chief. And with such a bright and warm day for February, I couldn't ask for more."

"Yes sir. Sir, my team has swept your conference room, and it is ready whenever you are."

"Very well, Chief."

Since the day Weizmann made the pact with his Palestinian friend, he'd had a meteoric climb to power, but he had no illusions. Ramiz friend was a fickle viper and could, and would turn on him if to his advantage. He smiled. *I have the power, my friend, and I too can be fickle.*

His secretary replaced the exiting security chief, "Mr. Prime Minister, the president would like a word with you."

Weizmann frowned, but said, "Very well, send him in."

The President of Israel, lean and small of stature, entered with his usual high level of energy. "Shimon, it is good to see you. I wish to offer my congratulations on forming your government yesterday."

"My old friend Limor, thank you. Yes, the presentation of ministers to the Knesset, and the confidence vote, went quite well. So ... I don't have much time, I must get my cabinet started. What can I do for you, Limor?"

“Of course you’re busy, I’ll get to the point. I understand you still have one or two vacancies in your cabinet portfolio, and I was wondering if perhaps you would consider a Shah party candidate.”

Weizmann winced. He had moved the meeting to the prime minister’s compound just to avoid this sort of petitioning common in the Halls of the Knesset. “That is difficult Limor, as you know. I have my own party to consider, and there are other members of the coalition to consider--”

“Certainly your RZO comes first, but surely, there is some small office you can share with the Shah party.”

Though he didn’t want to alienate such an important potential ally, every plan Weizmann had depended on a strong presence of his own party, the Revisionist Zionist Organization. “There are many things we need to accomplish, and time is short,” he said. “The necessity of a coalition forces me to share my offices with many parties, much larger than yours: Labor, Likud, and others. I cannot dilute my party any more.”

“Of course, Shimon. I--”

“Please don’t misunderstand, my friend, I’m not after absolute power, but my dream for Israel. A dream you share, for a pure and unified Israel, a powerful country and the source of many more, as in the time of David.”

What could the president say to rebut this? Fearing he might still try, Weizmann turned his gaze out the window and said, “Good day, Limor.”

As he heard the president leave, his thoughts held hope: OPEC’s embargo and Noss’ coalition infighting brought them to the brink, and my call for a vote of no confidence was just the push they needed. The mood of the country is ready, now I must take action.

He saw Benny Neeman’s sedan creeping toward the gate, and decided it was time to leave for the conference room.

\* \* \*

Benny, a new member of the Knesset, had managed an appointment as a non-voting minister without portfolio for Weizmann's cabinet. He could see that the lobby was already crowded when he reached the portico. Anxious, he shuffled through security, and chewed on his lip while he rode the crowded executive elevator to the fifth-floor cabinet room. Running late, he was annoyed with himself; his political advancement depended on assignment to some prestigious task, and like most success, that required being at the right place at the right time.

He entered the sedate cabinet room, took in the massive rectangular teak conference table, divided down its middle by dotted-line clutter of yellow placards, microphones, small square pencil boxes, and packs of bottled water. Seats for observers and lesser ministers, like Benny, lined the perimeter of stark white walls.

His steps slowed, but he tried not to show his dismay. For Benny, a center seat along the wall, just to the right of the great seal, was the most desired, because of the possibility of garnering a high-visibility assignment from the prime minister. Seeing the seat occupied, he scolded himself for not arriving earlier and settled for a seat near the end of the table, consoling himself that at least the seat was next to the prime minister's private entrance.

Looking around the room, he noted Eli Yishai, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, seated at the end of the table, and Benny judged by his downturned expression that Minister Yishai was busy exchanging dour comments with the Minister of Environmental Protection. Eli Yishai was also now the leader of the main opposition party, the ousted Labor Party. The mainstream moderates insisted he stay as Foreign Affairs Minister to ensure continuity in the Palestine negotiations, and to quell the international community's meddling voices.

With everyone seated, Weizmann entered last, directly from his adjacent office. Benny noted the prime minister was, as always, conservatively



dressed, today in a closely tailored dark-blue suit with an Israeli blue tie. As he passed, he rested his hand on Benny's shoulder, and the cabinet stood while he made his way to his chair in front of the great seal of Israel. As the cabinet members returned to their seats, Weizmann leaned across the table beckoning the Minister for Regional Development to lean over the table also, and whispered something in his ear. The minister nodded and they both sat down. Benny sensed something was going on, but had no idea what. This thought gained traction when Weizmann distractedly scanned the contents of a portfolio set before him.

I think he's stalling. But over what?

Gradually the room quieted, and Weizmann raised a hand, then stood and said, "Gentleman, this is the first Sunday meeting of, I hope, a long and fruitful list of many. We will begin with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the status of the talks." He sat back down, glanced at his office door, and started doodling on a yellow legal pad.

Eli Yishai, a short man with intense brown eyes and close-cropped full beard and mustache, presented an almost bumpkin image, compared to Weizmann, in an ill-fitted dark suit and oversized red tie. Yishai opened and began reading his formal report. Benny took notes, as was his habit, even though he knew much of the agreement's details. The treaty would create a new Palestinian nation carved from the ancient regions of Samaria, Judea, now known as the West Bank, and the biblical area of Philistine City States, now known as the Gaza Strip, along with the connecting security corridors between the two. The Palestinian National Authority was prepared to form a government, and in fact, Benny knew, had most of the ministries already in place.

Yishai concluded with what everyone in the room already knew: the talks were currently in suspension. Looking directly at Weizmann he said, "Now that the new government has been formed, we expect to resume and

conclude these negotiations. We patiently await your instructions Mr. Prime Minister.”

At the cue to speak, Weizmann didn't raise his eyes from his legal pad. Instead, he only glanced across the table to the Minister for Regional Development, who responded with a litany of the costs for relocating the Israeli settlements. Pounding the table, the Minister of Defense interrupted, shouting, “Costs? How can you talk about costs? We need oil. The Labor government squandered our strategic reserves while they negotiated our country away. If we don't get new supplies of oil and petrol within the next ten days, I cannot guarantee the security of our nation.”

The table erupted in a finger-pointing brawl of land versus oil, and the need for quick settlement regardless of the costs. Weizmann gaveled the shouting to silence. “Enough, enough ... we will postpone further discussion until the security cabinet meeting this evening. Let us move on to the next agenda item.”

Benny took sparse notes during the remaining two hours of reports, mostly on the compounding problems caused by the oil embargo. As the cabinet broke for lunch, he noticed the Minister of Atomic Energy and Intelligence grab Weizmann's arm, and with his head aside Weizmann's, whispered something, confirming Benny's suspicion. *It must be big*, Benny thought as he saw Weizmann's eyes widen and his face relax into a teeth-flashing smile. The pair became more animated in their secretive dialogue, Weizmann nodding and gesturing, while they disappeared into his office. This was an opportunity, Benny realized; where he sat, he would see the men emerge and be able to read the dynamics between them, perhaps even overhear their conclusions over the secret meeting. He decided to skip lunch.

While he waited, he listed the issues facing the thirty-fourth government. The oil embargo, a rare act of unity among the OPEC members to force Israel to agree to the formation of a Palestinian state, was at the top of the

list. National security, he thought, should be second; commerce, barely able to function with shortages in materials, food, and a host of other items, next. High unemployment, always a concern in Israel, would also need addressing. The counterpoint was the Orthodox Judaic view, an almost universal view, that recovery of the West Bank lands was essential to the reestablishment of the Covenant. Even the most liberal Jew held a bit of this belief. *Why shouldn't they? Were we not the chosen people, blessed and superior, at least in the eyes of Elohim, to all others on the earth?*

He looked up. The room had filled rapidly. Prime Minister Weizmann's security chief entered the room. "Gentlemen, an urgent matter has come up, and the prime minister wishes to continue these discussions with the full cabinet tomorrow. The security cabinet will convene in ten minutes. All others please clear the room."

What had been a routine security cabinet meeting, scheduled for later, had now become urgent, perhaps even an emergency. Benny couldn't believe his good fortune; he was in a prime seat, and now, one of six non-voting attendees.

The remaining fifteen attendees took their positions while the senior protocol aide rearranged the yellow placards. Eli Yishai sat directly across from Weizmann. Benny was amused as he watched the remaining ministers spread out on either side of the table, each jostling for the best position.

Weizmann strode into the room without announcement. They all stood, but he waved them down. With a firm voice he said, "Gentlemen, the Arab world has been holding a gun to our head to force an agreement we know in our hearts isn't right. That gun has been oil. Well, Elohim has shown us His hand. A large deposit of oil has been discovered, as large a deposit as the North Slope. Gentlemen, they no longer have a gun to our heads."

Benny couldn't believe his ears, it was exactly what Shimon Weizmann needed. He looked over at Eli Yishai, who sat wide-eyed and mouth agape in shock. Recovering, Eli Yishai blurted, "Mr. Prime Minister, but ... but, what about the statehood accord? They are scheduled to make an announcement on agreement tomorrow."

Benny pursed his lips in anticipation of Weizmann's response.

"Recall them at once, Minister Yishai. Everything is off the table, promise nothing, sign nothing, agree to nothing, and have all the negotiating team out of Washington as expeditiously as possible."

Flustered, Yishai just sputtered as he waved a deputy behind him out of the room to attend to the task. Regaining his composure somewhat, Yishai managed, "Mr. Prime Minister, this is great news, but it will take many months, if not years, to get it out of the ground. I don't believe we have that much time--"

"It is already being pumped out of the ground, three hundred thousand barrels a day--"

"What? I ... " Interpreting the smile crossing Weizmann's face, Yishai clenched his fists and shook his head. "You knew this all along. You knew when you asked for the confidence vote, didn't you?" With that, he slapped the table and went silent.

"No, no my dear minister, I did not know then. Mossad just informed me today. They also informed me that the wellhead is located in the Gaza Strip."

The air left the room. No movement. No sound. All eyes fixed on the prime minister. Benny squirmed in his seat, rethinking his earlier eagerness to be close to Weizmann.

Weizmann swept his eyes over the small group. "Gentlemen, Mossad has recovered PNA documents that show an oil field, camouflaged by the

Palestinians as a group of small farms. The oil wells were inside five grain silos. They are located at a place called al Qubbah, southwest of Gaza City within a half kilometer of the armistice line.”

A line created after the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, and still a point of contention, Benny thought, shaking his head.

“These documents also clearly indicate that the field’s main body is on *our* side of the armistice line. It is our oil!”

The prime minister paused. *Now the clincher*, Benny thought, and he was not disappointed.

“As you know, gentlemen, many plans have been proposed for linking the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The ARC Rail Plan and the Transportation Security Corridor, to name but two of the several proposed. The survey work for the TSC plan has been completed, and as you also know, it was adopted as the solution under the nationhood negotiations.”

As quietly as he could to avoid notice, Benny put on his glasses and grabbed his reference notebook, where he kept the more significant papers from his many meetings. He retrieved his copy of the TSC plan, which laid out several transportation security corridors: road and rail lines buffeted on either side by massive blast walls, planned for linking the West Bank and Gaza strip. *As part of the agreements*, he hurriedly read, *these corridors would remain under the sovereign control of Israel. Interesting.* He traced the southern corridor from a point southeast of Gaza city, about where Al Qubbah would be, to the southernmost point of the West Bank, Kramin. The starting and ending points for this corridor had been annotated with the letters “B” and “D,” and therefore given the common name the BD corridor.

Weizmann continued, “The security zone for the southern corridor, the BD corridor, has already been established, and these wells have, in fact been brazenly located within this security perimeter.” Weizmann paused and

looked into the faces of each of his ministers. “Gentlemen, these wells are our wells.”

Yishai broke the paralysis that had gripped the room. “Three hundred thousand barrels a day? That level of production could satisfy all our needs *and* that of the Strip. But ... Mr. Prime Minister, the PNA is not going to give us access, they will grow even bolder in their demands. What could we offer them? What have we left to offer them that would compel them to give us some oil?”

“I think there are other options.”

The Foreign Minister’s head reeled back. “Shimon, no ... you’re thinking of military action?”

“You’re a mind reader, Yishai. That is why I have suspended the talks. We must take possession of these wells before we resume negotiations.”

Weizmann raised his hand to calm the wave of protest. “The Gaza Strip is still under our national control. Although the previous government gave them almost sovereign autonomy, they are not yet sovereign territories. Moreover, I remind you that under the terms of the pending agreement, these wells would remain under our sovereign control. “

Yishai’s face was drawn and tight; his eyes darted back and forth across the empty space in front of him, as if searching for some note or observation to counter the prime minister’s proposal. His eyes stopped, his head rose, and in a slowly metered voice he said, “Mr. Prime Minister, getting to the oil fields is one issue. Getting the oil to our refineries in Tel Aviv is another.”

In the thick silence that followed, Benny saw a chance. He quickly pulled a detailed map of Gaza from his portfolio and studied it, saw the opportunity he’d been longing for. “Mr. Prime Minister, the oil field is about seven kilometers to the sea from Al Qubbah, with light residential development along a direct line to Gaza’s port and oil portal at the

southern tip of the city. So if I may suggest, a pipeline built from the production facilities to the portal, and tankers could move the oil to Tel Aviv. Also Mr. Prime Minister, if I may also suggest, we could declare the pipeline is being built to help the people of Gaza, by constructing a spur to their refinery just to the north of the portal.”

The room was silent. Weizmann raised his brow and nodded to Benny, then gave him a broad smile. “*Ahh*, there you have it gentlemen. What more can be said? Well done, Benny.”

Yishai said, “Mr. Prime Minister, I must object. There will be severe repercussions from the international community. And the Americans’ president will not stand for it--”

“My dear foreign minister, for years, the international community--the French, the British, and the Americans--has been telling us how to put our house in order. However, they all have problems of their own they need to attend to, the French and British with their own Muslim populations, and the Americans with their failing finances. It is time for us to take control of our own destiny. We can do it with a simple military action. It is time for us to fight for what is sacred.”

The room broke into applause. Agreement and actions were no longer in doubt. The energy of a quick solution to the nation’s problems was sweeping the cabinet away. Yishai didn’t applaud. Benny understood the reason for his reticence, knowing the meaning of the words politicians so easily bantered around: “a simple military action.”

“Benny, I want you to oversee the building of the pipeline,” Weizmann said. “You know all the ministers, so make it happen.”

Hiding his shock and pride, Benny straightened in his chair. “As you wish, Mr. Prime Minister.”

With that, Mukhtar Sheik Mohammed’s dogs of revenge were released.

## *Chapter 7*

In a modest home tucked into an aging orchard of almond trees, two young people celebrated, if not for the typical reason.

“To Palestine,” Jacob Khalid said. “May the new nation enjoy peace and prosperity for a thousand years. And we better start dinner now, because it’s not going to be something we would want to eat in a thousand years.”

He shared a laugh with his companion, trying to hide his apprehension. He and Amirrah Kohen had been waiting for the call from Jaad-di, Jacob’s grandfather, Husam Khalid the lead negotiator in the nationhood talks, but it hadn’t come.

“Well, shall we then?” he said, taking Amirrah’s arm and leading her from the sitting area of the central room to a nook set up as a dining room. Amirrah gave a tentative grin, then picked up her glass of Blenheim Cabernet. “Do you think Husam would approve?”

Jacob smiled at the mention of his grandfather, but paused in his answer while he savored the wine and the image of his dark-haired childhood friend. Once lost, and now found again. “You’re teasing, but yes, he would approve. After all, it’s only the Jewish side of me that’s drinking. But believe me, all of me is celebrating.”

Amirrah laughed, tossing back her long brown hair. “I like your attitude.”

“Is that all?”

She turned and faced him. “Well if you must know, I find Arabian men very ... *uhmm* ... attractive.”

“What? You like our big noses?”



“No, you have a small nose,” she said with a giggle. Then she ran her hand through his curly hair. “But I love your black hair, so black like coal. I love to pull it.”

“Yes, I know. You did that a lot during our days at the Rafah beach.”

Amirrah chuckled, then playfully traced a finger on his face. “I love your thick eyebrows, your ... Hebrew nose, your Israeli blue eyes ...” Jacob put his hands on her shoulders and drew her closer. She responded by punching his shoulder and pushing him back. “And yes, your hard body.”

“That was easy to get, there’s a lot of rubble in Gaza, and I’ve helped convert a lot of it into homes and shops.”

“I see,” she said and turned toward the dining table.

“Yes, it’s part of the Israeli recycling plan,” he added, joking.

She still laughed when she reached the table. Jacob loved to hear her laugh, to see her smiling lips accentuate her short, slightly upturned nose, that by contrast made her bright brown eyes seem all the larger. He lifted a black lace shawl, which had been his mother’s, from the back of a chair and wrapped it around her shoulders as they made their way to the dining nook. Amirrah had dressed up for the occasion, departing from her typical jeans for a white sleeveless dress. She looked up at Jacob, acknowledging his attentiveness. “So, you still have a problem with a woman’s bare shoulders?”

Looking down at her, he shook his head. “I just thought you might feel a chill.” For a second she sounded like the eight-year old tomboy she’d been when they first met.

Jacob, born in the United States of a Jewish mother and Palestinian father, was feeling that finally, he’d turned the corner in his life. Though it had been a tough one, marked repeatedly by the strife in Gaza. His father, a successful merchant, afforded Jacob and his mother a wealthy lifestyle in

Gaza until the First Intifada. When both his parents were killed, Jacob was sent to live a more modest life with his Palestinian physician grandfather, and that was when he and Amirrah met.

They sat down to a traditional Muslim meal of *chraime*, a spicy fish and vegetable casserole, and challah. “Amirrah, it looks so perfect, just perfect,” he said.

“Just something I came across during my master’s research on Muslim traditions. At least I understand part of you.”

While they ate, they continued in pleasant conversation of childhood memories, but soon Jacob’s conversation thinned, yielding to his growing apprehension. Jaad-di still hadn’t called to let him know about his return flight. He straightened his Rolex, his grandfather’s gift. “I’m glad Jaad-di and your father worked together at the Deir El-Balah Clinic. Otherwise, I might have never met you.”

“I doubt that. Fate has a way of arranging things, you know. Actually, it was because we were Jews in Gaza that we became close. Did you ever think of that?”

He lifted his eyes to hers. “Yes, I have. My friends always wanted to play terrorist games, and I was always the hostage, so playing games with you was an easy choice.”

Her brown eyes glinted mischief. “I see. So you fooled around with a girl only because your friends were tying you up. And I thought it was because I was sexy.”

They both laughed. “Well, once I discovered girls, I did think you were sexy,” he said.

“Yes, the beach was fun--”

“Oh, I was thinking of the fishing trips.”

She threw her napkin at him. “You would. You were bad.”

“I didn’t notice any complaints at the time.”

Her smile widened. “I did like our talks though. They were honest.”

They reached across the table for each other’s hand, and then returned to their meal, though they didn’t continue chatting. When they’d almost finished, Jacob topped off their wine and said, “What have you been thinking about?”

“I was thinking about a quieter time. A quieter you. A time when you would never miss going to temple.”

Jacob dropped his head, his finger tracing the rim of his wineglass. “That has become difficult.”

“It’s your uncle, isn’t it?”

“Yes ... you know how he is ... a strict believer of Islam.”

“He’s changing you. I’ve noticed how you have changed. You’ve changed even during the short time since we met again.”

Jacob remembered the day a year ago, their first meeting since childhood. Struggling for a way to bring things back to the lightness they had shared before, he said, “Oh? And how I have I changed?”

“Well for one thing, even though I’m an American-born Jewish girl, you seem to pull scarves and shawls out of thin air whenever we’re out in public, or not.” She flapped the shawl off her shoulders. “Exhibit A.”

But now, she was smiling as she spoke. They shared a laugh again, and Amirrah added, “I’m okay with that, because in my line of work it is better to blend in.”

Smiling, Jacob glanced down at his wine, but then looked back up, “It’s been a wonderful year, being together again with you.”

“Yes. And it was so curious, the way we met again. Quite a coincidence after all those years.”

He nodded. "I never expected to see anyone I knew at the Israeli-PNA negotiating team social. I should thank your supervisor for sending you that night."

She shrugged. "I was as surprised as you were. I heard they needed agents to supplement the security team, and made my case to Ehud. To my surprise he agreed, but only to put me on standby. But I got lucky, they needed a certain number of security, and when Tajh called to say he couldn't make it, I was next on the list to be called. Such is the life of those who work for the Israeli Defense Force, it's the IDF way."

Jacob lowered his head again, a broad smile on his face. "I've been meaning to ask. Do you know Dr. Uriel Dror?"

"The IDF surgeon general? Yes."

"He's Jaad-di's old friend."

"Of Husam's? Well, that explains things." She grinned. "Husam the matchmaker arranged it, did he? Explains how you so easily got his house for our getaway."

"Well anyway, I'm glad it happened. So now, with peace and statehood finally happening ... now I can think about having a normal future."

She paused with a bit of challah halfway to her mouth. "*Normal future*. That's hard to define in Gaza. What's your idea?"

"When Husam returns from negotiations, I'm going to join him at the foreign ministry in Ramallah. My application's already been accepted."

She returned the bread to her plate and picked up her glass, raised it.

"L'Chaim! Oh, that's wonderful. No more repair shop then. Is that all that's in your crystal ball?"

"Not at all. In the not-too-distant future, I see a lot of little curly-haired Amirrahs running around."

Amirrah let out a shriek, almost choking on her wine, and they both enjoyed a good laugh, a rolling release of tension, a delighted laughter that generated more from its ridiculousness and its contagion.

They finished their dinner and Jacob took her hand, adjusting her shawl, and led her to the open porch at the rear of the house. The house, Husam's house, was still in the name of Jacob's mother, a convenient arrangement that kept it off the IDF's radar. Situated just beyond the reach of the city clutter, it was fashioned of mud bricks and iron, as were all the homes in Gaza; wood was almost a "precious metal," a status item. The orchard surrounding the house stretched for a half kilometer in all directions. At one time, it had been the source of enjoyment and modest income for his parents. Now, an Israeli barrier wall, erected years earlier along the 1948 armistice line, truncated the orchard.

The Israelis had built silos atop the wall every three kilometers, structures containing remotely controlled weapons. Because of the danger posed by the robotic guns, within three hundred yards of the wall the ground was barren, the trees just beyond it ill kept, disfigured with dead limbs. Some towers had missiles and some machine guns. The latter dominated the orchard. These domed turrets responded to any near movement, opening like the leaves of a Venus flytrap to release the weapon into the hands of a remote operator who could lay down a deadly arc of fire, covering the entire orchard. Many a farm field near the wall lay fallow, roads unused, because of these fortifications. Standing with Amirrah on the patio, surveying the orchard, Jacob realized he resented the towers, especially the one directly behind the house. In a way he held Amirrah responsible, though he knew she no more had the power to remove them than he did. Only peace and Gaza Strip autonomy could do that.

He watched as she bent her wiry frame for a closer look at a wildflower growing near the edge of the patio, and then, still holding the flower, she

took a deep breath, taking in the subtle fragrance of the trees. It was the first week of February, and already the almond trees were in bloom.

“The first to bloom, the trees of hope,” she mused. “Perhaps they’re a sign that the talks will bear fruit this time.”

Jacob glanced at his watch, reminded that his grandfather still hadn’t called. “It’s going to happen, there’s no doubt about it this time,” he said, but knew the doubt in his voice spoke more of a wish than conviction.

She scrunched her face with regret. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to remind you--”

“Yes, he was supposed to call by now. It’s probably nothing. He *is* getting forgetful. Perhaps he’ll call from the airport-- Oh, have you seen the plans for the connector corridor?”

She tried to absorb the shift in topic. “Well ... only the small images in the papers.”



Jacob’s Map

“Ah, well, let me show you.” Jacob retreated into Husam’s study, emerging with a large map, which he unrolled on the round white patio table. With excitement, he spoke as he traced his finger over a green dotted line that ran from west to east, from Kramin, just south of Al Khalil, to Al Qubbah in the east. At each point was a gray box with a letter label. “See here? Terminals for a high-speed rail line and divided highway. They’ll connect Gaza to the West Bank. There will be security roads on either side. When it’s completed, we’ll be able to travel from Gaza City to Al Khalil International in thirty minutes.

“And that’s just the first of the many corridors that will be constructed,” he pointed to the block labeled “A,” Beit Hanun in Gaza, and “C,” Tarqumiya in the west. “Construction of the ARC rail line, running from Jenin in the North to Al Khalil in the south. Construction has started with the first segment around Al Quds--”

“You mean Jerusalem.”

Jacob closed his eyes, felt the tension starting to fill the space between them. “Of course, of course, Jerusalem, yes. I just hope that too much has been done for the Zionists to back out now.”

A sideways glance told him she viewed the detailed map with the condescending interest of a woman with other things on her mind. Her reaction mirrored his fear that if the talks did fail, as unbelievable as that seemed, the patience of the Palestinians, the suppressed frustration with the continuing inequities, would end.

She looked up and smiled at him. “Yes, all this stuff is great, but ...” Then she noticed the pout on his face, waved her hand over the map and added, “I’m sorry Jacob, it’s a woman thing. It’s just that ... there are security problems around the construction sites, a lot of people don’t want this to happen, and my boss has made it clear that security around the terminals is a high priority.”

Jacob felt the lightheartedness of the dinner fading, and the depressing reality of Middle East politics seeped in like an evening fog. "Of course. Of course, security. Yes, you would know about terrorism and security, you are Mossad."

As she turned, as though ready to head inside the house, he rolled up the map, picked it up. But then, not wanting to leave the patio, he threw it back down. Amirrah stopped walking but her back remained to Jacob. He said, "Oh, congratulations, by the way, on your acceptance into the IDF's anti-terrorism unit, Eilath I think you call it. Quite an elite unit, I hear."

"Thanks. Though I guess that places us somewhat on opposite sides of the track, so to speak. I ... I mean, I hope it never becomes a problem between us."

He stepped over to her, so close he almost touched his mother's draped shawl. "How could it? We'll be at peace now, problem solved."

She turned around to face him, and Jacob thought he saw a tear in her eye as he said, "Anyway, no matter what happens, we can't let it get between us."

Amirrah leaned her head onto his chest and said, "If my mother hadn't died, Father wouldn't have taken the research position at Rambam and moved us to Haifa. And perhaps Husam wouldn't have given you up to your uncle. We would have been together all this time. Everything could've been so different."

"If, if, if," he said, trying to make light. "You had your prep school, I had my Al Zahraa Islamic."

"Yes, but preparing us for what?"

"The University of Haifa, and Palestine University for me--"

"No. You know what I mean. We each have our passions now. Yours is Gaza and mine ..."



“Yes I know. Mossad.”

He went to the patio’s bench and sat down, and gazed out into the grove now bathed in the waning light of day, trying not to notice that she hadn’t followed him. “I’m sure you know the situation better than I, Amirrah. The oil embargo brought Israel to negotiate seriously, but it also brought down the government. I just hope the need for oil *and* peace is never far from Shimon Weismann’s thoughts.”

Still holding her wineglass, she shrugged. “At this point I don’t know any more than you. Everything was on track for signature last night, with a public ceremony today.”

She approached him and, wrapping her arms around his neck, bent and whispered in his ear, “Besides, there must have been something else on your mind to bring up ‘little Amirrahs.’ I’d much rather talk about that, than politics.”

He smiled and reached behind her head, pulling her toward him, and gave her a deep kiss, mouth covering mouth, a sharing of breath, his tongue probing the warm sweetness of her lips.

Standing, he abruptly pulled away. “I’m sorry, it’s not right, we shouldn’t be alone--”

“What? Jacob! I’d rather have Jacob the little Jewish boy, it was just starting to be fun.”

“That is why we must stop. It’s Satan making you say that.”

She blew out a frustrated sigh. “And it is your controlling uncle who’s making you say that.”

His mind roiled with confusion. She was right in a way, and this was not the first time this had happened. He had to figure himself out, because he was a real Jekyll and Hyde when it came to romance. He never could decide if he were a contemporary Jew or an orthodox Islamist.

She closed her eyes and clenched her fist. “Jacob, forgive me, I know I shouldn’t have said--”

“It is not my uncle,” he said. “No one controls me. It’s what the Sharia demands. You’re mocking my beliefs.”

“I am not mocking you, Jacob, or your Islamic beliefs. But your uncle does have a hold over you. Like this past summer. We were all set to go to Bodrum, and I was so looking forward to that, but then he sent you to that electronics school in Egypt.” A slight smile returned to her face. “And there went our chance to go fishing again.”

“You don’t understand, I had to do that, I had no choice. But with peace, it doesn’t matter, I’m through with electronics.”

Her smile vanished. Jacob suspected he had triggered the Mossad in her. She shot back, “You did go to Egypt, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did.” He got up, went to a tree and plucked a flower from it, studied its simple white-petaled beauty. “You know I did.”

“You’re hiding something Jacob.” He turned around to face her, saw her, arms at her sides, clenching her fists. Then, exhaling, she appeared to relax. “Look Jacob, maybe you did and maybe you didn’t, but whatever I’ve stumbled over, be it a stick or viper, it’s behind us, and right now I don’t want to know.”

She went over to him and, facing him, placed her hands on his chest and looked up into his eyes. “Let’s not argue anymore. Just hold me. You can do that, can’t you?”

He nodded, wrapped his arms around her, and tightened his embrace. There they remained for some time in quiet solace, which seemed like a mere moment when Amirrah’s BlackBerry chirped.

She glanced at it. “It’s my office, something has happened, I’ve got to go. Give my love to Husam when you see him.”

Exchanging a light kiss, she grabbed her purse and jacket and was out the door, leaving Jacob to ponder, indeed, who he was.

## Chapter 8

Amirrah entered the compound, pulling into one of four entrance locks where a large retractable steel-and-concrete wall blocked her passage into the garage. Another panel was raised behind her, and a remotely controlled robotic arm with a high-resolution camera and other sensors probed under her vehicle's carriage. Another camera checked her ID and scanned her face. Satisfied, the remote operator lowered the forward gate, and in keeping with her newbie status, she proceeded to the lowest level of the garage.

“Immediate: return to office for spec ops.” That’s what the message had said. Though she had the evening off. *I’m not even on the call list!* She suspected Ehud was just throwing his weight around in the waning hours of the official existence of Mossad’s Gaza unit. Her anti-terrorism unit, the Eilath unit, consisted of herself and her partner, Tajh Amity. Their office, a shared cubicle, was in the center in the fourteen-story gray-white building housing the Israeli government offices for Gaza. They were in the same government complex as the PNA, just south of the stadium in Gaza City. Mossad occupied the twelfth floor.

She emerged from the elevator to a scene more like the frenzied floor of a stock exchange than an intelligence office. The twelfth floor was a large open room containing a maze of low-partitioned cubicles, and lined along the walls with a handful of glassed-in offices and small conference rooms. Dozens of agents were swarming into task groups; long collapsible tables were being set up to supplement the conference rooms. A squad of technicians was installing pods of computers, printers and phones, forming a jungle of power cords and USB cables along the floor.

She went to her open-bay cubicle and found Tajh, still in his long black coat, hunched over, his *payot* curls dangling above his keyboard, scanning three computer screens. “We at war?”

“Operation Slayer.”

“Slayer?”

“Location and isolation of all potential terrorist threats.”

Passing their cubicle, their branch chief shouted, “Everything north of Nahal Oz.”

Without looking up, Tajh raised an arm in acknowledgment while Amirrah mentally translated to the northernmost sector of the Gaza Strip. The Nahal Oz Road split Gaza City, and ran from the sea to the 1948 armistice line.

“Did you miss me?” Tajh said, not looking up.

“Yes. No. I mean, I had a date-- Has there been an attack?”

“Did you let him kiss you?”

“What? Hey, back off. It’s none of your business.”

“Weizmann has ordered the IDF to secure Al Qubbah.”

“Al Qubbah? I just came from north of there. Nothing out of the norm, just a couple of farms and open fields there. So why the action?”

“You wouldn’t be protecting your fisherman boyfriend, would you?”

“You’re out of line Tajh, and stick to business. I might be a new section head, but don’t push me. I *will* write you up. Now, for the last time, what is going on?”

“Operation Slayer.”

Amirrah groaned. “Tajh, you’re talking in circles.”

“Good, there’s another one.”

“Another what?”

“A terrorist.”

Amirrah peered over his shoulder at his monitor. “A protesting student?”

“Yes, but he assaulted a soldier.”

“Tajh, he only bit him. What is going *on*?”

With a sigh, Tajh removed his glasses. “The IDF is securing Al Qubbah because they discovered the PNA is tapping into a large field of crude, and is pumping and refining it for their own use. The field largely lies under and outside the armistice line.” Hearing something this incredible, Amirrah felt the sudden need to sit down. “They’re stealing oil?” The realization came. “That’s why there haven’t been any gas lines in the Strip.”

“Exactly. Anyway, they hid the derricks, or rather, camouflaged them as grain silos....”

“So much for the pastoral.”

“Right. So, the IDF has been ordered in to secure the area around the wells, that’s Al Qubbah, as well as a corridor to the sea for an oil pipeline. Isn’t it great?”

Her mind had been working hard to keep up, but this left her stunned.

“We’re throwing away the nationhood negotiations for *oil*?”

“Well ... negotiations have been suspended. If we get this oil, we won’t have to go back to the table, except on our own terms. Isn’t that great?”

Clearly Tajh was excited, and why not? A Hassidic Jew, highly orthodox in his beliefs, and an avid supporter of the extreme right, he was obviously pleased with the turn of events. *Why wouldn’t he be?*

Her throat tightened so that her words were barely audible. “We are just short of declaring war.”

“The chief sent you a list of international types who might be in Gaza,” Tajh continued. “He wants you to ...”

She glared at him. *Men just can't accept a woman as their boss.* As if he knew what she was thinking, he continued, "Look, I'm just trying to give you a heads up here. He wants you to track them down and see what they're up to."

She acknowledged him with a weak wave of her hand, already feeling weary, and stared blankly at her monitor. Peace, statehood. Gone. And this frightened her. This would be a crushing blow to Jacob's plans. In her mind she could hear Jacob's uncle, giving his nephew a litany of the evils of Israel.

She shook her head. She couldn't dwell on this, and she had work to do. She dismissed Tajh, ordering him to go home and catch a couple hours of sleep, and returned to the screen.

The list contained more than 250 known international terrorists wanted for questioning or arrest. Using Mossad's terrorist database, the various ministry databases, as well as the Internet, she started checking each name. Her research division experience made her familiar with most of them, but she plodded through the list anyway. Generally, this step ended in dead ends; the violent ones seemed to fade into history, usually by IDF hands, but a few just vanished from public records. *Most of the others will be just the unlucky, caught up in a protest--*

A chill ran through her as she came to one probable Palestine resident: Mukhtar Sheik Mohammed.

She read the research synopsis: Born in Rafah, Gaza Strip. Grew up in Kuwait, joined the Muslim Brotherhood at sixteen. Attended college in North Carolina, earning a mechanical engineering degree in 1987. Worked at an electronics firm in Wilmington, North Carolina, frequently writing the editor of the *Wilmington StarNews*.

She scanned copies of those letters in his electronic file. They all addressed the one-sidedness of US foreign policy favoring Israel. His last

letter, which had garnered the FBI's attention, was a rambling tirade of disgust for the United States, citing equal status for women and the Southern US attitude toward outsiders as evidence that the country was debauched and racist, a thought that both amused Amirrah and brought chills. She returned to the synopsis.

*Mukhtar went to Afghanistan and joined in the fight against the Soviets,* the investigator had written, followed by a listing of pro-Islam associations she easily recognized.

It is the opinion of this author that Mukhtar's association with these efforts solidified his Islamic extremist views, the investigator concluded.

"I'm shocked, truly shocked you felt that way," Amirrah muttered while chuckling.

Flipping to another file, she reviewed the long list of terrorist attacks where Mukhtar was the suspected mastermind, which included the Bali Night Club Bombing in 2002 and the 2001 World Trade Center.

*Wow. It's like reading a compendium on terrorism--* She looked up from her screen. There was something about the Bali Night Club bombing, but she couldn't remember the detail. Returning her focus to the report, she read, "In 2003, the CIA in Rawalpindi, Pakistan captured Mukhtar and eventually transported him to Guantanamo Bay, where he was held until his trial in 2010."

There was nothing after that, so she searched the Internet for the stories about the trial. She recalled the trial was a propaganda spectacle, ending in Mukhtar's eventual release, and that Mukhtar had vowed revenge on the United States and Guantanamo guards for his alleged tortures.

Soon, she understood why the record ended in 2010--nothing came up with his name. Thinking this impossible, she checked the immigration records for any of Mukhtar's known aliases, trying dozens of variations, but no name came up any more recent than 2001.



She emerged from her intense data search as she always did, feeling as if she'd surfaced in her own personal submarine, taking stock of the world she hadn't noticed for a while. It was eight in the morning and the office was coming to life; a smattering of agents, like her, stared with reddened eyes into their computer screens, but others were arriving with new energy. She rubbed her neck, staring blankly at the records on the screen, and her mind drifted back to her dinner with Jacob. *I don't want to think it, but I still think I'm right about--*

Then it occurred to her: What *was* it about Jacob's uncle? She returned to the databases.

Jacob's uncle Ramiz had a passport from Kuwait and a current Palestine driver's license, but owned no house or car. Although never convicted of a crime, he'd been arrested several times and charged with organizing protests. A notation in his file suggested he might be a member of Hamas. What was more interesting was the lack of any documents from 2002 until the past year. Amirrah opened the Israeli Association's Database application to run a query to see who might be linked to Ramiz. The IAD showed several current Gaza City residents listed, one of which was Habib Sinan. Amirrah vaguely remembered a bully named Habib, who used to harass Jacob when they were teens. But a name she expected to see, Jacob's, wasn't on the list.

"So ... who *is* Ramiz Ajam Mohammed?"

Startled from her concentration, she looked up to see Tajh standing behind her looking at her screen. "Tajh! Oh, he's just a minor soldier with Hamas.... I thought you were gone."

Tajh nodded at her screen. "I don't remember seeing him on any lists."

"Yeah, like I said, a minor player." Then, trying to change the subject, "I told you to go home and get some rest. But you're back."

“Hello, it’s Monday. I’m earlier than usual, but I couldn’t sleep, too much going on.”

She quickly turned off her terminal, which she was sure Tajh noticed. But the challenge she expected didn’t happen. Tajh activated his computer and continued his intelligence-gathering tasks of the day before, all the while gently rocking and cheerfully humming a song poem from temple, as if on vacation and trying to put together some puzzle of puppies or flowers or butterflies.

“How can you be so cheerful?” she said.

“Amirrah, for the past three years the Arabs have held us hostage. ‘Us,’ as in the whole nation. And now we can exact our revenge.”

“Revenge? How can you talk of revenge? Never mind the terrorists, the Palestinians are going to riot. People are going to get hurt, or even killed, Tajh. What are you thinking?”

“It is time for us, as a nation, to follow the Halachic principles and restore the Covenant. We must reclaim Judea and Samaria.”

She felt as if she’d been thrown into a brick wall. “The West Bank,” she whispered, more to herself than to him. “I don’t know if I can do this,” she murmured. When the Hassidic sect secured the majority power in the last election, she had expected a sterner approach to the Palestinians. But the Halachic principles? They reaffirmed the Jewish race as the chosen people, created in the image and likeness of God, and everyone else as an inferior copy, “Everyone else,” including the Palestinians, and the Americans. Like Jacob.

“I think I’ve had enough, Tajh, I’m going home to get some rest.”

Still humming, Tajh didn’t acknowledge her, but kept on culling the data for any who might stand in the way of Israeli progress. She packed her bag and, blanking out all but necessary consciousness, walked to her car.

\* \* \*

Tajh stood up from his chair, coffee cup in hand, and idly fingered papers on his desk as he watched Amirrah take the elevator from the floor. He slid over to her terminal and resumed the IAD application, looking for whatever he could find about Ramiz Mohammed, determined to find out what she was so obviously hiding. To his disappointment, Ramiz's record was as Amirrah had said: nothing remarkable. There were a few notable associated names, but only one caught his attention. From his internship assignment to the IDF Gaza City police barracks, he remembered that Habib Sinan was involved in drugs, but usually went by the name of Ali-Saad. On a hunch, Tajh queried the IAD using that alias. It paid off. At the site of the Shalvata Restaurant bombing in September 2000, an underage boy and an Ali-Saad were questioned and released. It was the same restaurant bombing where Amirrah's brother was killed.

Now he knew why she didn't mention what she'd found. The question was, who was the boy?

## Chapter 9

Jacob, stressed after a sleepless night, drove with a heavy foot down empty predawn roads to Arafat International. *Why didn't Grandfather say anything about the talks when he called?* The muscles in his neck and shoulders were in knots; the news from the nationhood talks couldn't be good, he could feel it, but didn't want to admit it. He fought to suppress the ongoing skirmish in his head: *I'm not bound by the pledge I made. Uncle forced me ... no, he blackmailed me.*

Unconsciously, he rubbed the back of his neck while he tried to rationalize the words spoken in the mosque. He would have said anything to gain his freedom. Freedom to lead his life. And perhaps his uncle was counting on that. Then the realization of how this had already affected his life spun to the forefront.

Amirrah is right for me. I should have kissed her again. Why did I turn her away? I can't lose her!

And the hardest question by far: How can I hold on to her if I don't have my own life?

He turned onto the access road to the airport, tucked between Rafah on the west and Egypt to the south, officially known as Yasser Arafat International, called by most YAI. The main terminal was a single-story alabaster building with high arching windows that soared up the sides of the control tower, giving the main terminal a cathedral-like appearance. Jacob was impressed with the progress of the repairs from damage caused by the Israelis at the outset of the al-Aqsa Intifada ten years earlier. He had forgotten to take the note he made with the flight information, but dismissed that as not a problem since there were only a few daily departures and arrivals, mostly to and from Athens.

Once inside the airport he made a quick check of the arrival gate and headed right to it. Security was not a concern at YAI so he easily made his way past plastic sheeting shrouding the construction areas, and arrived at the gate before the plane. Still anxious about the negotiations, he tried to calm himself, and had convinced himself it was probably nothing, just last-minute posturing, when his grandfather appeared on the jetway.

Husam Khalid's pale complexion was unusual for the strong sun of Gaza, but Jacob thought he appeared unusually tired and drained from the flight and the negotiations. Jacob smiled broadly and waved, hiding his bitter disappointment over the sudden suspension of the negotiations. "*Assalamu alaikum*, Husam," he called out.

"*Wa alaikum assalam wa rahmatu Allah*, Jacob," Husam said as he gave his grandson a hearty hug.

Jacob snatched his carryon from his grasp. "How are you, *Jaad-di*?"

"Weary, Jacob. It has been a long trip with too much time to think."

"I didn't hear about an announcement, what's going on?"

Husam shook his head and motioned for them to walk the short distance to the baggage claim area, where he waved Jacob over to one of the benches. "I'm sorry I failed you, Jacob, and all Palestinians."

"What? Me? You haven't failed me. No, it couldn't be your fault anyway, but what ... what happened?"

Looking around with a raised hand, Husam motioned Jacob closer. "Be that as Allah sees fit, the Israelis had a sudden change of heart. Something said, some feelings hurt, or it might be just because they had a change of government. Whatever the reason, the negotiations have been suspended."

"When are you going back? Have they set a date?"

Husam gave a weak smile. "No, no, I am not going back. Apparently, the chairman of the negotiating team did not appreciate my comments to the

Israeli delegation. I mean, the frustration of it all! It was finished, everything discussed endlessly. All that remained was to issue a statement and schedule a formal signing. But the Israelis were recalled also. I ... I don't understand it."

Jacob spotted Husam's baggage on the carousel. "You are not going back, because...?"

"How shall I put it to you? Let's just say I've been retired."

Jacob retrieved Husam's bags, and they slowly walked out of the airport. They didn't speak until they left the parking lot for the hour's drive back to Husam's home west of Gaza City.

"Amirrah and I had dinner at your house last night," Jacob said. "We weren't chaperoned, but we were proper."

"I'm sure you were, except for the kiss that you stole."

Jacob felt his face heating. "She even agreed to wear a hijab while outside the house."

Husam chuckled over Jacob's embarrassment. "As you know, I am delighted you find her attractive. So what are your plans for her?"

"My plan was to get a real job. To work with you in the Foreign Relations Authority. They accepted my application and I've been offered a position. But, I think that's not going to happen. At least not the way I had thought about it."

"We've been working for peace for sixty years. This is just another setback. They need you at the Foreign Ministry. You can give a balanced view, which is very important to achieve mutual trust and understanding. Do not delay. Pursue your dream."

Jacob nodded, though his face didn't reflect the joy he should have felt at Husam's words. "And as far as my thoughts about Amirrah, I think I must postpone that until permanent peace is assured."

“Love doesn’t come often, and a women’s heart is fickle.”

“No, I must be certain of the future.”

Husam stroked his short white beard, glancing out the car’s window while he considered his words. “Jacob, you need to know this. The negotiations were not postponed. They were terminated by the Israelis.”

Jacob’s hands tightened on the wheel. “What? But why?”

“They accused us of bad faith, of stealing their oil.”

“Oil? As Allah is my witness, we know that isn’t possible. We have no oil in Gaza.”

Husam tilted his head to the side. “Actually ... there is. The PNA have some sort of secret wells at Al Qubbah. Well, it was a secret until an anonymous letter arrived at Mossad headquarters in Tel Aviv, revealing the fact. Anyway, our refinery in Rafah, which has made it possible for us to avoid the shortages plaguing Israel, has been a question the Mossad were investigating, so it was only a matter of time.”

“But if the oil was found inside the Gaza Strip, why are the Israelis accusing us of stealing?”

Husam shook his head. “The Israelis produced a copy of a geological survey at the conference. It indicated that the bulk of the oil field is under Israeli land allocated for the connecting corridor with the West Bank.”

Jacob, struck by the full impact of how his life would change, stared with dead eyes down the road.

“Jacob, look out!” Husam grabbed for the wheel and jerked it to the right, avoiding a tanker truck.

Jacob snapped back, pulled the car off the road and stopped. “Sorry, Husam. I just can’t believe that Weizmann would take such a risk. The oil field has to be small.”

“In his tirade, the Israeli foreign minister insisted that, based on the amount of crude being trucked to our Rafah refinery, it is a huge field, rivaling any in the Middle East.”

The next thirty seconds, Jacob tried to absorb the enormity of what his grandfather was telling him. Finally, he pounded the wheel and screamed in rage, wanting to lash out, but there was no target. All he had worked for, his relationship with Amirrah, his freedom from his uncle, all of it could be lost.

“Then I must fulfill my pledge to Allah,” he finally managed.

“Your pledge? What did you do?”

“Jihad for a Palestinian nation. It was the price for my freedom.”

“Freedom? Freedom from who-- Ramiz? No, you must not listen to him.” Husam returned his gaze to the window and stared out across flat landscape populated with rubble and plants more gray than green, struggling to exist as everything seemed to be. “I regret the day I let him take you. I should have been strong--”

“I have regrets as well. I didn’t think there was any doubt we would be a nation by this day.... He said you were too old, too busy.”

“Yes, I’m sure he did. Just as he blackmailed me into letting you go.”

Jacob snapped around in his seat and faced Husam. “What do you mean?”

“In 1994, we were also very close to peace, and forming an independent state. The Izzedine al-Qassam brigades would have none of it. They publicly insisted that land once conquered by Muslim brothers, decades and centuries ago, was holy, and occupation by anyone but Muslim was unendurable humiliation. It was obvious to me, despite their public posturing, that Hamas simply wanted control. They wanted control of the people, power and wealth.”



His gaze again on the window, Husam continued. "I was tired of the killing and the suffering. It was like there were two battling war machines with the people, like sheep, caught at the center. So, I informed for the Israelis. It was to stop Hamas. Somehow Ramiz found out. He threatened to expose me, unless I turned you over to him."

"Are you now--?"

"No, no of course no. But that is why I joined the diplomatic staff. I have worked hard too, for nationhood and peace. And now I failed, and ... I'm done."

Both of them just sat there, along the side of the road, and Jacob knew his grandfather was trying to absorb what he'd just said, just as much as Jacob was trying to do. Jacob remained staring straight ahead. *What will the days ahead bring?*

Husam spoke first, "Do not believe this is the end, Jacob. And do not listen to your uncle. I am sure that someone in Hamas is behind this. The information that was leaked was too detailed to be from any other than an inside source."

Jacob glanced at Husam, then started the car and returned to the road. "If there is peace, then I am free of my oath. If not, I am a soldier and I must do what a soldier must."

"No, Jacob. It does not have to be that way. Don't forget you are also a Jew. Would you fight Amirrah?"

"If Allah wills it, then yes."

Husam slumped in his seat. "When Ramiz was caught in 2003 ... when I convinced you to live with me ... I'd hoped I could undo some of your indoctrination. But by the time Ramiz was released, you were a man, and I couldn't forbid you from joining him in Rafah. Apparently, he wasted no time in resuming your ... education."

Ignoring the defeat in his beloved grandfather's voice, Jacob wheeled the car into the narrow drive, which wasn't more than two compacted ruts leading to Husam's retreat. He opened the door to remove the bags.

"Jacob, wait," Husam pleaded.

Jacob stopped, his legs turned out of the car, looked back at Husam. The old man's eyes were flooding with tears.

"In the hospital, I promised your mother I would temper your high spirit. Even then, it was obvious you were passionate about things. She did not want you to become an extremist, Muslim *or* Jewish, but to have balance in your life. Do not go off in anger, full of hate. Please Jacob, do not add to my failure."

Jacob paused to consider the words, but then got up, slamming the door, and removed the bags from the trunk. Husam pulled himself from the car and walked to the front door. Jacob set his bags at his feet, then turned toward his well-worn motorbike leaning against the side of the house.

"What are you going to do, Jacob?"

"What are the Israelis going to do? Perhaps they will get more than they bargained for. Perhaps Ramiz will be killed. But I am not going to abandon my people."

"And who are your people, Jacob?"

Pausing just a moment to look at his grandfather a last time, he turned and donned helmet and goggles. Two swift kicks of the starter pedal and the aging bike roared to life, and Jacob headed back down the road to Rafah, but where he was going, he wasn't really sure.