

## **Advance Praise for *Perfect Enemy***

“Dystopian science meets utopian politics as competing visions for the future of the Middle East unfold across Israel’s brittle political landscape. From the gossip-laden corridors of the Knesset to the high-tech labs of Tel Aviv and the rugged hillsides of the biblical West Bank, Sinclair draws on his deep familiarity with local politics, customs and social cues to keep the action thundering toward a startling, thought-provoking payoff.”

**Matthew Kalman, author of *The Murder of Yasser Arafat* and *Psychobibi***

“A blood-splattered room littered with the corpses of Arab terrorists and Israeli settlers... The perfect setting for a Middle Eastern love story. Hold on for a harrowing ride full of twists and turns. A page-turner!”

**Rabbi Burt Visotzky, Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies Emeritus, author of *A Delightful Compendium of Consolation: A Novel***

“I couldn’t put the book down!! Engaging and intelligent.”

**Paula Weiman-Kelman, filmmaker and director of *Eyes Wide Open* and *Fringes***

“A compelling read which drew me in and kept me involved throughout. It evokes the people and places of contemporary Israel skillfully and authentically and I found myself engaged with the characters and eager to know how the story would end. It’s an intelligent thriller that gets the reader thinking about issues in Israeli society and politics that are all too relevant today.”

**Alan Hoffmann, former Director-General and CEO of the Jewish Agency for Israel**



## **A Note from the Author**

This book was written and completed many months before the 2023 Simchat Torah massacre by Hamas and the subsequent war.

The themes of the book – Jewish trauma, the desire for revenge against those who have caused us harm, the persistent hopes for peace, and the brutal realities of this region – are perhaps even more relevant now than before. I hope that this novel will add its voice to the conversations, issues and questions that this period has brought forth, perhaps shedding a different, more textured, kind of light. Fiction, ironically, can sometimes provide a depth of understanding that fact cannot.

Parts of the book, starting as early as the TV interview in chapter 2, might read like they were written after October 7th, but they were in fact written months or even years ago. So were the scenes from the final pages of the novel, which – without giving away any spoilers – may bring to mind some of the worst moments of October 7th. Prescient foreshadows have become painful echoes.

The book is probably harder to read now than it would have been on October 6th, but I hope that it will still be a compelling, suspenseful, exciting read, offering some respite from the despair that hangs over us. It even contains moments of humor, and despite everything, I hope those will make you smile. We still need that.

Thank you for reading *Perfect Enemy* and thereby taking the plunge into this messy, painful, traumatized, but still beautiful, part of the world.



# **PERFECT ENEMY**

**Alex J Sinclair**

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“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*





# Chapter 1

The newborn baby cried, but the doctor made no attempt to calm him. She cleaned up the baby, weighed him, and diapered him. The baby began to quiet down for a moment, and seeing this, the doctor took a metal clip from the medical chart on the table in front of her, and carefully attached it to the baby's right arm. The clip pinched the baby's flesh and dug into his skin, causing the baby to shriek at this new source of pain. The doctor watched as the skin between the teeth of the clip got redder, and the baby wailed harder.

"That's right," she said. "Hurts, doesn't it? That's for my great-aunt Frida. Frida Eisenbaum and her three children. Treblinka, 1943. Cry, you little shit. There's plenty more where that came from."

The medical facility was private, gleaming, state of the art, but small: just this one birthing room, set off from a slightly larger space of laboratory rooms and sterile refrigerated storage units. The facility was five levels underground; far above, the noise, fumes and humidity of Tel Aviv jostled for space in its clogged rush hour streets. But down here, all was calm. The procedure had been a C-section, with the mother sedated under general anesthetic, as per the plan. Apart from the mother and the baby, the room contained just two women. The first woman, the project's anesthesiologist, removed the clip that she'd clamped on the baby's skin and put it back on the clipboard, and the second, the ob-gyn surgeon, having cut the umbilical cord only moments ago, got to work suturing the mother's womb.

The anesthesiologist put the baby in the incubator, took out her pen, and

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began to fill in the paperwork on the clipboard. The baby continued to whimper, and the sound suddenly transported her back to that night: pinned against the seat by the airbag, windscreen cracked with bullet holes, her husband's blood splattered on her face, her own baby girl crying out in agony in the seat behind her before the wails dwindled into that awful silence. *Never again*, she whispered to herself.

She attached a tag to the baby's wrist, giving its forearm another hard pinch as she did it. The baby cried out in pain again, and the doctor nodded grimly, blinking away a tear.

*Never again.*

## Chapter 2

Twenty minutes later, the surgeon, out of her scrubs, knocked on the door of Akiva Cohen's office. Cohen had been running the project for over a decade, and she had worked with him for most of that time. She'd trained as a midwife and an ob-gyn, done residency at the Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital at the outskirts of Jerusalem, and spent years delivering hundreds of babies with the sole purpose of preparing for this delivery. Her last delivery.

She heard a muffled "come in," opened the door, and walked up to Cohen's desk.

"Nu?"

"All went as planned. Birthweight 3.1 kilos. Apgar 9. Looks and sounds like a regular baby boy."

Akiva took a deep breath. A tight smile. "You could have told me on the phone, you know. Or passed on a message via Neta."

The surgeon shook her head. The tired wrinkles around her eyes creased briefly with kindness. "Had to tell you myself. Had to see your face when I told you."

Akiva tilted his head in acknowledgement. His smile loosened just a little. "Yup. I guess you did. Thank you, Shira. I'm glad you came."

Akiva's fists clenched themselves involuntarily, looking for air to punch in joy; his stomach lurched with terror.

*There's no turning back now...*

He fished out a paperclip from a mesh metal tray in the corner of his desk.

Fingers shaking slightly, he began twisting and bending it out of shape, balancing it on the desk. His forehead prickled as it sensed Shira's gaze still upon him.

"Anyway..." she said. "Can't stay... have to go back down there to finish up." But she remained motionless, looking at Akiva, patiently watching. Waiting.

Akiva's fingers scrambled for another paperclip from the pile. "How is Sivan doing?" he murmured, still not looking up.

"She's keeping the mother under sedation for the time being. But she's fine. Tired. Happy. Scared. Not quite sure what to think. Like me."

Akiva finally met her gaze. "I know. This is where it gets complicated."

Shira closed her eyes for a moment too long to be just a blink. "Anyway – I'd better go get started on that cleaning up." She gave a brief, tired smile, gathered her things and walked out of the office.

Akiva's office door was labeled:

*Dr Akiva Cohen*

*Director, GeneLight Corporation*

GeneLight's offices were on the twentieth floor of a shiny Tel Aviv skyscraper overlooking the Mediterranean. Around, above and below them were lawyers, accountants, insurance firms, a couple of hi-tech startups – all the usual accoutrements of Tel Aviv's swanky office buildings. To the outside world, GeneLight looked like just another faceless biotech company, like dozens of others in Israel's "startup nation." Shira walked out of the suite, past the bank of public elevators that led to the lobby, to a single elevator at the end of the corridor. Using a combination of thumbprint and iris recognition, she called GeneLight's secure elevator, which gave direct and swift access to their laboratory facility twenty five floors below. Until today, a total of four people had ever set foot in that underground facility. The mother had been the fifth. The baby was the sixth.



Akiva leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes in relief. The first phase of the project, the Scientific Phase, had now come to completion.

But his chest tightened with a pang of nervousness. Phase 1 was over, but Phase 3 – the Public Phase – was still another nineteen or twenty years away, at least. Phase 2 was now beginning, and there was still a long way to go.

Akiva opened his laptop and went into his email. He selected a few pieces of junk to trash, and then opened up an incognito window, ran a separate program, and clicked on the message from the other day. He began reading it, for the umpteenth time. He didn't believe in God anymore, but this reminded him of the days in which he used to pray. Reading the same text over and over again, each time feeling a new sense of elation from the familiar words:

From: jondoherty@newstartbayarea.com

To: akivacohen@privatemail.co.il

Subject: follow up on your request

Dear Dr Cohen,

I'm following up on our conversation a few weeks ago  
and your subsequent email with further details –

Suddenly, though, before Akiva could get to the end of the email, there was another knock at the door. Akiva hastily closed the email, re-encrypted it, and shut his laptop.

“Come in.”

This time a man entered. Taller and slimmer than Akiva, sun-tanned, buff. Akiva led the life of a scientist: sedentary, inactive, brain always on the move but seldom body. His body had paid the price, with high blood pressure and a bulging waistline. He was in his 40s, but looked older, grey hair frizzing unkemptly, Ben-Gurion-like, over a bald patch. The man who had entered was a couple of years older, but somehow looked ten years younger. Yoav Schindler,

Akiva's collaborator and partner. And funder.

The two men hugged. Not the usual half-hearted, don't-worry-we're-heterosexual, man-hug used on birthdays, religious holidays, or family celebrations, but a real, full-blown, body hug. The kind of hug reserved for once in a lifetime breakthroughs.

They broke apart, but still held each other by the shoulders.

"Akiva, mazal tov." Yoav shook Akiva excitedly. "You've done it. The sacrifices, the secrecy, the pain... but you've done it."

"*We've* done it. I couldn't have succeeded without you." Akiva dropped his hands from Yoav's shoulders, and they flapped uselessly by his side. He put them in his pockets for a moment, but then took them out and put them back awkwardly on Yoav's shoulders.

"Enough with the modesty," said Yoav. "I'm just the money guy. This is your achievement. You own this."

"Thank you," said Akiva. "Thank you for believing in me all these years."

Akiva tried to move back a step, but Yoav kept his arms firmly on Akiva's shoulders, his eyes locked on Akiva's, a look of quiet satisfaction on his face. "I knew you would succeed," he said. "Always knew it, thank God."

Finally, Yoav broke off, and looked around the room. "Look, the Blonde Bitch is on TV again," he sneered, gesturing with his head.

A flat screen TV, permanently set to the news channel, hung on the side wall of the office. Most of the time it was set to mute.

"It's a really unpleasant nickname," muttered Akiva. "You shouldn't call her that." He moved back toward his desk and randomly shuffled a few piles of paper around.

"Why not? Everyone else does." Yoav looked at the screen, unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves as if challenging the two-dimensional image to a fight. "All the liberal crap that comes out of her mouth, she deserves it. Turn it up and let's listen for a minute. It's good to keep abreast of how the enemy thinks."

“Seriously...? Let’s not waste our time on—”

“Turn it up,” repeated Yoav. Akiva did not protest further. He opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out the remote, unmuted the TV, and sat back in his desk armchair, pretending to watch. The “Blonde Bitch” was Hadas Levinson, a young, up-and-coming politician of the left-wing Labor party. The right-wing bloc led by the Likud and its uncompromising leader had won the previous elections, but Levinson, elected to a high position on the Labor party’s list through its primaries after this defeat, had begun to lead a movement to push out many of the old guard and put together a slate of young, fresh faces. She was already being spoken about as the future leader of the opposition and maybe even a future Prime Minister.

*“...of the current government’s position.”* The volume went up as Levinson was being interviewed on one of the early evening news shows. *“These policies have been leading Israel towards an abyss for the past two decades, and we have to wake up before we fall into that abyss. We can no longer control another people and expect them and the world to be okay with that. The Prime Minister and his coalition continue to lead us in the delusion that long-term peace is possible without first solving the Palestinian question. It’s criminal that they still hold to this delusion.”*

*“Criminal?”* The interviewer interrupted. *“That’s a strong word. Do you really mean it?”*

*“You know what – yes, I do,”* replied Levinson. *“A criminal is someone who endangers the life and property of another person. And that is exactly what this Prime Minister is doing. He is therefore, by definition, a criminal.”*

“Turn it off,” spat Yoav, turning away in disgust and waving his hand dismissively at the television. “I can’t take it any longer. The chutzpah of this... girl... this child... this fucking bitch who’s barely out of diapers... to call one of our country’s greatest leaders a criminal...”

“You wanted to listen,” mumbled Akiva, half under his breath, pressing the mute button and returning the remote to its drawer.

“I must be some kind of masochist,” snorted Yoav. “You know the hardest thing about our work? It’s the patience. To think that we have to wait twenty more years before we can wipe the smug smile off people like Levinson’s faces...”

“Patience is the name of the game now,” sighed Akiva, almost to himself. He swiveled his chair away from his desk and looked out at the silent bustle of Tel Aviv with the twinkling sea beyond, inhaling the calm hum of the air conditioner. The constant lies lay congealed beneath the surface of his skin, blocking his pores. His whole being ached to break free. *Not yet, Akiva, not yet. Soon.*

Yoav drew closer to Akiva, turned his chair back to face him, and put an avuncular hand on his shoulder again. “Anyway. Akiva, I’d like us to call the staff together. Bring everyone in. Let everyone share this moment of success. Now is the time for recognition: I want to personally honor everyone who knows the truth about the project.”

“But we’ve—” Akiva tried to protest.

“Who needs to be here?” pressed on Yoav, ignoring him. “Obviously Shira and Sivan. But who else?”

Akiva looked around the room, trying not to make eye contact. Sandpaper grated in his mouth. There was a carafe of water on his desk. He looked at it but didn’t reach for it. Didn’t trust himself to pour it without shaking. “Yoav... you know that the success of this project has always depended on secrecy. On nobody, not even you, knowing who else knows.”

“Today is different,” said Yoav. “Today we finished Phase 1. It’s taken us years. Years of my life as well as yours. We have a long journey still ahead of us. But first we must celebrate.”

Akiva’s eyes were drawn back toward Yoav’s as if in a tractor beam. He took a deep breath and exhaled. “Fine. You’re right.”

“I’m always right, Akiva, don’t you know that by now?” said Yoav, with a winning grin, pulling off the illusion of self-deprecation along with impossible, unbreakable self-confidence. “So? Who?” He leaned up from Akiva’s chair and



stood expectantly above him.

Akiva rubbed his hands uneasily on the tops of his trouser legs. The sweat from his palms left a slight imprint. He inched the chair closer to the desk, keeping his legs out of Yoav's line of sight.

*Calm, Akiva. You're so close. Tell him what he wants to know. As usual.*

"I've kept the insides of the project a closely guarded secret," he said. "As we have always agreed. There's the four of us here, of course – you, me, Shira and Sivan – and, well, it's the five of us actually, because Neta's in the loop too."

"Neta? Seriously? I thought she just answered the phones up here, I thought you'd kept her away from compromising information."

"She's... um... never been down to the lab itself," said Akiva. "But at some point, she got suspicious, and I had to bring her into the circle. It wasn't easy. She almost ran out of here screaming. But she came around, and I have no doubts about her loyalty to the project." He looked up at Yoav briefly, almost daring Yoav to question him, but then backed down.

Yoav clicked his tongue five times, as if writing to hard disk the information that Akiva had just given him. He took a leisurely glance round at the TV on the wall. The day's headlines were scrolling through a bar at the bottom of the screen. Yoav scrutinized them for a few moments, muttering a private commentary on each headline as it rolled past. "Good... Interesting... *Idiots...* Must talk to him about that..."

In due course he sniffed languorously and turned back to Akiva. "So that's the entire staff here at GeneLight. Who knows apart from this group?"

Akiva paused. Yoav wasn't going to like this. "Tomer knows too."

"Tomer Kleinberg? Shit. That is such a mistake. Why him?"

Akiva licked his lips, trying in vain to bring some moisture to his throat. "I had to tell him, Yoav. He's my lawyer, and I'm engaged in a complex business here that is only going to get more complex as the years go by. I need protection. I'm not like you. You have... connections, you'd be fine if something went wrong, if we got found out. But I need to feel... safe."

Yoav sighed. "Who else?"

Akiva forced his shoulders back, his neck up, his head straight. *You're better than him.* "That's it. That's everyone. Six people."

"Six days of creation," said Yoav, leaning in toward Akiva again, giving him another squeeze on the arm. "A fitting number for the new being that we have created here. Call Tomer. Tell him to come over here tomorrow evening for a *L'chaim*." He pulled out his wallet and, like a card sharp playing a trick, nimbly extricated two 200-shekel bills and magicked them onto the desk in front of Akiva. "Buy a good bottle of whiskey for us all."

Akiva made as if to argue for a moment but stopped himself and let Yoav leave. As the door shut, he grabbed the carafe of water with both hands, poured himself a glass, and brought it unsteadily to his lips.

*It's going to be worth it. It has to be worth it.*

He looked at the money that Yoav had left on the table and picked it up stoically. He held the notes by their corners, rubbing them softly between his thumb and his forefinger, glancing at the office door where Yoav had just left, then looking down again at the money. He stuffed the notes into his trouser pocket, and then wiped his hands on his shirt.

*Just a few more weeks. Then it'll be too late for Yoav to stop me. For anyone to stop me.*

# Chapter 3

Over the past couple of years, Hadas Levinson had become a household name – or rather, household nickname: she was aware that half the population of the country called her “the Blonde Bitch.” She happily accepted this nickname for two reasons: firstly, because it didn’t hurt her political ambitions to be portrayed with such hate by the right wing. It just made her a stronger candidate amongst her own base. Secondly, the association that everyone had with her free-flowing blonde hair made it easy for her to disguise herself. Before leaving the Knesset, she would go into a bathroom, put on a brunette wig and dark sunglasses, and walk out. She’d never once been recognized. The wig made her whole head incredibly hot – *how the hell did Ultra-Orthodox women cope with these things all day long*, she often wondered – but she was prepared to pay a bit of *schvitz* as the price of anonymity.

After her TV interview, she walked out of the Knesset’s front gates and turned left, heading downhill toward the Israel Museum. She was always amazed by how small the city was. For all that the right wing blustered about Greater Jerusalem and its Arab neighborhoods being part of Israel’s “eternal, undivided capital,” the parts of Jerusalem that most Israeli Jews were familiar with were all within walking distance.

She crossed Ruppin Street and took one of the paths that led into the Valley of the Cross. The Valley was a collection of footpaths and half-footpaths through hills, rocks, and grass, that formed a natural barrier between the Knesset, the Supreme Court, and the Israel Museum on one side and the beginning

of downtown Jerusalem on the other. It was owned by the Greek Orthodox Church, and an age-old contract forbade it in perpetuity from being developed. It was one of Jerusalem's lesser-known gems: in the middle of everything, literally steps from the centers of power, it was a green space away from the crowds. A place where one could be anonymous out in the open.

Walking toward her was a man in a white shirt that would be worn only a handful of times and then discarded, a pair of designer jeans, and some kind of Italian import crocodile- or snake-skin shoes. His skin was the light olive shade that could easily have been either Sephardic Jew or Palestinian Arab. He, like Hadas, wore sunglasses, but his, she was sure, must have cost five times as much as hers.

"*Salaam aleikum*," she said to him as they drew together, and gave him a brief but warm hug.

"And *shalom aleichem* to you, my dear," he replied. "I would say that it's been too long since I last saw you, but you're on my TV screen pretty much every day. What an interesting job you have!"

Hadas shrugged. "Beats poisoning teenagers for a living."

"My dear, you underestimate me," said the man, shaking his head in faux disappointment. "My company sells cigarettes to young people, old people, men and women, Jew and Arab – we are an equal opportunity poisoner!"

The man was Omar Suleiman, and he was a member of the elite club, small in number but large in cultural importance, of wealthy East Jerusalemite Palestinians. He'd inherited his father's company, a mid-size importer and distributor of cigarettes, and turned it into one of the Middle East's largest.

"You know," retorted Hadas, "If an Israeli called me 'My dear,' I'd immediately have him sprawled across the papers for sexual harassment."

Omar smiled. "My dear," he repeated, lifting his sunglasses momentarily to reveal a trademark raised eyebrow, "You can take the boy out of Harrow, but you can't take Harrow out of the boy." Omar's father had been invited by the PLO in the late 1990s, during the heady days after the Oslo peace process, to spend

two years in London as the PLO's business attaché, and the impressionable early-teenage Omar had spent those years in one of London's most prestigious public schools.

"I thought that the Palestinians have never forgiven the Brits for the Balfour Declaration?" said Hadas with a grin.

"Well, my dear, it's true that the Balfour Declaration was one of the greatest diplomatic disasters ever to befall the Arab world, and that the actions of the British led to the stillbirth of the Palestinian national movement, the radicalization of Islam, and the schisms of the Middle East as we know it." Omar paused for a perfectly timed beat. "But on the other hand, a good strong cup of PG Tips with a nice chocolate biscuit does lead one to feel rather forgiving of the chaps, doesn't it?"

Hadas giggled in loving exasperation. "OK, I give up... as usual..." she said. She sat down on a bench by the side of the footpath.

"That's the spirit," preened Omar. "Now if only your army would have the same attitude once in a while..."

He sat down next to her, and she gave him a playful kick. Their banter was part of their relationship, and had been from day one. Hadas wasn't like this with anyone else – she was business-like, steel-willed, no bullshit, no messing around. But with Omar she found herself taking part in extended comedy routines like some kind of high-end BBC sitcom. She knew that Omar played up the whole British schoolboy thing for her – he also wasn't like this with anyone else – but she loved it.

They sat next to each other in silence. The evening sun reflected brightly off the sandstone footpath. The hum of crickets came from a nearby shrub, and birds chirped overhead. In the distance, the rumble of Jerusalem traffic, the occasional car horn.

Omar reached his hand across and began entwining it in Hadas's fingers.

She pulled her hand away. "Omar, we can't. It's too public. Even with my wig on. I can't risk it."

Omar sighed: “*There is a comfort in the strength of love; ’Twill make a thing endurable, which else would upset the brain, or break the heart.*”

Hadas looked at him with the kind of frustrated patience that is reserved only for those we really love. “OK, showoff. Keats?”

“Wordsworth, actually.” Omar smiled.

“You know, some men use comedy as a deflective shield. For you, it’s melodramatic poetry.”

“I shall polish up my Mel Brooks impression for next time, my dear.”

A pause. They looked at each other in silence. Hadas reached over and took off Omar’s sunglasses. He squinted at the light, but his eyes were dry. For all his sensitivity, he was still a mix of stiff-upper-lipped Brit, dignified patriarchal Palestinian, and tough guy Israeli, and none of those character traits would have permitted his eyes to tear up. “If only you’d spent some time in America,” she had once told him. “Then maybe you’d have feelings.”

“Feelings, my dear, in my family,” he’d answered, “are what happens when you stub your toe on the table leg. *Those* are feelings.”

Omar reached across to take off Hadas’s sunglasses too. She raised her hand and stopped him.

“Can’t do it. Unlike you, my eyes *are* showing my emotions right now.”

“I know. I will just have to imagine them, then.”

A pause again. The tranquility of the setting was calming, almost hypnotizing. Hadas composed herself.

“Omar, I don’t have much time. There’s a vote I have to be at in half an hour.”

“How tiresome. I was so looking forward to sharing my thoughts at length with you about Middlesex’s latest follies.” Hadas gave him another of those looks of frustrated loving patience. “Cricket, my dear, cricket.”

“Again with the cricket,” muttered Hadas, rolling her eyes.

Omar sighed. “Fine, fine, fine, I’ll stop,” he said, and switched into serious mode. “I heard they’re going to close the case against those settlers in East Jerusalem?” he asked, leaning against the back of the bench, hands behind his

head, stretching his feet out. He breathed in deeply, inhaling the light scent of jasmine from a nearby tree. To those who did not know Omar, this would have looked like listlessness; Hadas knew that this was his pose when his brain was at its most attentive.

“I heard so too. Annoying, but not surprising.”

“Such myopia,” groaned Omar. “There’s a real strategic opportunity here to address residency and nationality issues for East Jerusalem Palestinians. Might write something about it tomorrow. The editor of *Al-Quds* has been pestering me for another piece.”

It was almost like a metamorphosis, Hadas thought, how he did that. One minute Omar was this ironic, self-knowing caricature of an Englishman abroad; the next minute, he was back to Omar the Palestinian nationalist, a unique “connector” who had ties to everyone, but *everyone*, in the Palestinian business and political community. His outspoken op-eds in the international media made him a thorn in the side of the Israeli establishment, but his political activism in collaboration with Jewish Israelis made him something of an *enfant terrible* in the Palestinian community too. He received the occasional death threat both from right-wing Jewish settlers and radical Islamic terrorists who believed that he had “sold out to the Zionists.” *Sometimes*, he had once joked with Hadas, although it wasn’t really a joke, *I think that I’m the one who needs a brunette wig.*

“*Yalla, habibti.*” *So, my love.* “What shall we talk about?” said Omar. “Is this always how it’s going to be? A few moments snatched here and there?” He put his sunglasses back on again.

“I hate it too, Omar,” said Hadas. “But you know it’s the only way. For both of us.”

“You’re right, I know,” sighed Omar. “I can see the headlines now. ‘New survey finds that most Israelis would be perfectly okay with their future Prime Minister’s husband being Palestinian.’ Hmm. I think not.”

“Ah, we’re playing Israeli-Palestinian conflict poker, are we?” grinned Hadas.

“I’ll see your ‘new Israeli survey’ and raise you. You think that you could breeze in and out of Jenin for your business meetings with Hamasniks with your Blonde Bitch Israeli wife in tow?”

“Touché,” beamed Omar, doffing an imaginary cap in Hadas’s direction.

They both sat in thought for a few moments.

“You realize this is the first time we’ve used those... um... words... to describe our future?” murmured Hadas.

“Yes, I was just thinking the same thing,” said Omar. He paused. “I like it.” He cleared his throat and made a gesture as if to introduce the empty footpath in front of them to Hadas. “‘*My wife* Hadas Suleiman.’ It has a nice ring to it.”

“I think I’ll be keeping my name,” smiled Hadas, leaning over to give him an elbow to the stomach, “you old-fashioned patriarchal oaf. But I like the sound of it too... ‘my husband Omar’...”

They sat in quiet shared rumination, enjoying the fantasy but weighed down by its impossibility.

“In another universe, maybe,” said Hadas.

“Or in this universe, if we both give up everything else in our lives,” said Omar.

Hadas gave a nervous laugh, but then realized that Omar hadn’t made a joke. “You’re serious?” she asked. “You’d give up your business, your position in Palestinian society, your reputation, everything that makes you who you are... for me?”

Omar shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s a hypothetical question, isn’t it? Because you’re never going to give up your political career for me. And you shouldn’t. You are an amazing person and someone who might actually bring some change to this pathetic region, and a little thing like the love of your life shouldn’t come in the way of that.”

Hadas looked at the ground. “I can never tell when you’re being ironic and when you really mean it,” she said.

He took off his sunglasses once more and studied her carefully. “I’m being



serious, Hadas. I love you. You are the love of my life. I've never felt this way about anyone before. I wish you could be my wife. In another time, another place, I would want to marry you and have children with you and live happily ever after. But we live here, in this place, in this time. And both of us are addicted to this place and this time. Both of us, each in our own way."

Hadas turned her eyes to the ground again. A shiver of reality passed through her body. "We could elope and move to New Zealand together."

"Hmm," said Omar. "They do a rather lovely *Sauvignon Blanc* down there, I'll give you that. But my dear, after two weeks of gazing at the sheep we would both find it terribly boring. We would long to be right back here in this swamp. Back with the shitty highs we get from this shitty part of the world."

"You're right," said Hadas. "A girl can dream, though." She looked up from the ground at Omar's face again. "You're the love of my life, too. I also wish... wish we could be together, wish we could be normal... but you're right, I also want to do things here, for this country, for both of our peoples..."

"And if our relationship was public, that would be impossible," concluded Omar. "That's just how it is. And so, for the time being, at least, we must stick to these secret meetings. On the bright side, we're getting to know so many hotel rooms around this city that we could open up quite a definitive travel review website!"

Hadas gave a kind of gurgle that was a laugh and a cry at the same time. She elbowed Omar in the ribs again.

Another pause, as they both reveled in that moment when two people have told each other how they feel about the other, when each knows that, quite amazingly, quite insanely, quite impossibly, the other person feels the exact same way. Hadas sighed. "I have to get back. It's a vote on this new environmental legislation that I'm co-sponsoring. Got to be there."

Omar patted her on the hand. "Ever the crusader for all that is good and right in the world. Go get 'em, my love. My parallel universe wife..."

Hadas smiled. "I can live with that for now. Goodbye, my parallel universe

husband. I'll see you tomorrow night?"

"Yup," said Omar. "I'll pick a hotel and text you. But wait, give your eyes a little wipe first." He held out a tissue.

"So thoughtful, my parallel universe husband is," sniffed Hadas. She took the tissue and wiped a couple of tears from the corner of her eyes. Then she stood up and, without looking back, walked back up the hill in the direction of the Knesset.

Omar waited a few minutes and sighed a deep, pained sigh. Then he got up and headed off in the other direction, toward where he'd parked his car, ready to head back to East Jerusalem.

# Chapter 4

Akiva slumped back in his chair and blew out his cheeks. After waiting a minute or so to make sure that Yoav wasn't coming back, he pulled open a drawer in his desk; the same drawer where he kept the TV remote. In it was an eye mask and a box of disposable earplugs. There was a sofa on the wall of the office, opposite the TV, the kind that might be used for informal meetings with business associates when "across the desk" wasn't the right vibe. But Akiva didn't have any business associates. The sofa served a different purpose. He gingerly walked over to it, sat down, and carefully rolled the earplugs into small tubes before placing them into his ears. He then put on the eye mask and curled up on the sofa with his back to the TV, stuffing his face into the crease of the cushions. Slowly the earplug tubes expanded in his ear canal, blocking out the faint sounds of the street below. Between the earplugs and the face mask, Akiva found himself in total sensory deprivation, and that was what he wanted right now. What he needed.

There were no lies in the silent blackness that enveloped him. In the blackness he saw his future, the world's future, the future that he alone would create. In the blackness there was light. Just for a few minutes.



He'd first met Yoav many years ago, when he was a graduate student. It was the height of the Second Intifada: bus bombs, explosions in cafes and nightclubs,

deadly gunfire on cars traveling near Palestinian villages. Barely a day went by without further terrorist attacks and casualties. Two weeks ago, a Palestinian terrorist had blown himself up along with thirty men, women and children celebrating the Passover seder at a hotel in Netanya. The whole country was in shock; the IDF was in the middle of a massive and bloody operation in Jenin in an attempt to destroy the Hamas network responsible for the waves of suicide bombings; and in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, the cafes and pubs were empty. A pall of death hung over the whole country. A nervousness infested every conversation. People jumped at any loud noise, any ambulance siren, any traffic jam.

Inside the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Givat Ram campus, though, an air of normalcy remained. Security at the entrance had been tightened, so once inside, you could relax. It was a beautiful, warm spring day, and the campus was buzzing with activity. Akiva sat on the grass in the middle of a large central lawn, reading the copy of *Scientific American* magazine that he'd just bought. It took the foreign newspapers and magazines a few days to make it to the shops in Jerusalem, and he'd been waiting for this one to arrive. There was a long-read piece in it with updates on the life of Dolly the Sheep, the first mammal to have been cloned from another animal. Dolly had been created by a team from the University of Edinburgh a few years ago, but, so it was reported, was now suffering from premature arthritis and other early onset health problems, raising many questions about the process's success.

Givat Ram was the home of Hebrew University's science faculties. The more famous Mount Scopus campus, in the far north of the city, was where the humanities departments sat, and that was the image that was usually conjured up in most people's minds when they heard "Hebrew U." Givat Ram was the lesser-known, less glamorous campus, with student dormitories that were falling to pieces and an array of squat, functional department buildings that would win no architecture prizes. But it lay in the center of the city, near the Knesset and the Supreme Court. Near the centers of power.

Cross-legged, leaning against his book-stuffed backpack behind him, Akiva began reading the magazine. After a while, he became aware of someone standing over him.

“You too, huh?” The figure stood between him and the sun, so all Akiva could make out was a tall silhouette. But he could see that the silhouette was holding the same *Scientific American* as he was.

Akiva squinted, and made out the features of a fellow student whom he knew by face, but not by name.

The tall student sat down on the grass opposite Akiva. Like Akiva, he wore a small knitted *kippah* on his head, signifying membership in the Religious Zionist community. He tapped his magazine on Akiva’s, as if clinking wine glasses together. “Yoav Schindler,” he said. “I’ve seen you around. Akiva, isn’t it? Akiva Cohen? You’re the lead doctoral student in Farbstein’s research team, right? Everyone says you’re his great prodigy. His anointed successor.”

Akiva shrugged, his cheeks flushing with fleeting redness. “I don’t know. There’s a lot of smart people around here. Which of us will end up succeeding Farbstein – a lot of that’s down to luck, I think. But yeah, I’m on the team.”

“I hear Farbstein’s been enjoying some serious *Schadenfreude* these past few weeks because of this Dolly setback,” said Yoav. “That Edinburgh team are your chief rivals, right?”

Akiva hesitated. He looked back down at his magazine, debating whether to respond. Conversations like this, interactions with new people, drained him. He’d learned how to engage with people when he had to, how to make small talk, how to joke, even, but it sapped his emotional energy. There was something about this Yoav, though, that demanded response. Something insistent, something compelling.

Akiva folded over the corner of the page he was reading and closed the magazine with resignation, placing it on the grass in front of him. “Yeah, he’s quite a competitive sort, loves winning, hates losing,” he said. “You’ll find that out soon enough, I guess. You’ve just started here, right? I’ve seen you around

campus, but not in lab or class. What program are you in?”

Yoav nodded but continued to press Akiva, moving imperceptibly closer to him with each question. “So: what do you think? First sheep, next humans? That’s Farbstein’s end goal, isn’t it? Isn’t that what you’re researching too?”

Akiva nodded back. The back of his shirt felt damp, clinging to his skin. He pulled it up, trying to shake some air through it, and lifted his collar over his neck, which suddenly simmered with heat from the spring sun behind him. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being tested. By whom and for what purpose, he wasn’t sure. “Humans... yes, eventually. Still a ways to go before we get there. Is that what you’re thinking of focusing on too?”

“I’m focusing on saving the Jewish people,” said Yoav.

Akiva gave a short laugh, but then realized that Yoav wasn’t joking.

“So what about this British team?” Yoav continued. “How far ahead of us are they?”

“In some ways they’re ahead of us,” reflected Akiva. “They’ve certainly got the headlines, and of course they birthed a live mammalian clone, which we haven’t yet. But I think there are other ways in which our work is superior. This setback for them” – here he tapped his magazine and shrugged his shoulders – “makes it pretty clear that in the long game, we’re not far behind them, and maybe even ahead of them.”

Yoav smiled. In one smooth, graceful movement, he sat down on the grass, tossed his magazine to the side, and leaned back next to Akiva, stretching his legs out and resting on his arms. “Good to hear,” he said. “Good to hear.”

Akiva remained cross-legged. He wiggled his shoulders to relieve the nervous tension that Yoav’s nonchalant self-assurance had saturated into them. He could sense him still watching him. *Why did other people have to be so damn confident? How do they do that?*

Yoav said nothing. He examined Akiva pensively.

With his right hand Akiva started brushing a patch of grass to and fro, like stroking a cat’s belly, enjoying the soft feeling of the blades as they gently tickled

his fingers. He looked up to see Yoav still watching him and finally grasped at something to say. “So... what... what exactly are you studying here?”

“I’m kind of a non-matric for now,” drawled Yoav. “Investigating a few different... options.” He turned onto his side, chin resting on hand, with a cool ease that made Akiva’s skin tingle with both envy and agony. “Tell me, what do you make of the government’s response to all the terrorism we’re experiencing?”

Akiva was momentarily thrown. “Um... fine, I guess,” he mumbled.

“Come on, you can do better than that,” said Yoav, punching Akiva playfully on the arm. But then Yoav became serious, leaned toward him, and spoke more quietly. “Akiva: I know who you are. I know where you come from. As far as I’m concerned, you’re Likud royalty. Your opinion matters to me.”

“I think you have me mixed up with someone else,” said Akiva, looking down at his shoes.

“Naftali Cohen. One of the architects of Begin’s first electoral victory in 1977. Brilliant young political thinker and strategist, practically wrote the book on campaigning from the center-right in Israel. Rumor has it that Begin saw him as a future cabinet minister, was grooming him to run for office. Forgotten today, because he tragically died before his time in—”

“I know when my father died,” cut in Akiva.

“Sorry,” said Yoav. “I didn’t mean to... you know... hurt you... it’s just that... well, I’m one of those who hasn’t forgotten him. I’ve studied him. Look, you’ve probably already guessed this, but I’m not—”

“You’re not a scientist,” Akiva cut in again.

“Right.” Yoav smiled. “I must stick out like a sore thumb here.”

“Well,” sighed Akiva, shifting a bit and maneuvering himself onto his knees, looking Yoav up and down, somehow tapping into Yoav’s confidence and drawing on it for himself, “Let’s see. We have the designer shades, exhibit number 1. The designer haircut, exhibit number 2. But the clincher is the designer linen jacket that a) I could never afford and b) I could never pull off even if I could afford it... so yes, I think you’re just a little too cool and confident for this

campus. We're all science nerds here. We're the ones who got beaten up at school for being too smart."

"Ouch," said Yoav. He paused and snapped into a serious tone again. "But lest you misunderstand me: I was also smart at school. In other ways."

Akiva's stomach twisted with a brief pang of something that he couldn't quite explain: like the moment of zero G-force on a rollercoaster, adrenaline and excitement mixed with primeval fear.

"I don't doubt it for a minute," he said. "So. You're smart. And you're not a scientist. But you've been milling around Givat Ram for weeks, and now you're quizzing me about biogenetics and cloning. So, Yoav Schindler, what are you? Who are you?"

Yoav reached over for his magazine, straightened it out on the grass between the two of them, and placed it delicately on top of Akiva's copy, adjusting it so that the two magazines stacked together precisely. He took off his sunglasses and looked at Akiva. Yoav's eyes were shining, mesmerizing. His smile was infectious.

"I work for a small, rather secretive, but very well-funded thinktank," said Yoav. "Our mission is to identify the best and brightest young doctoral students whose work we believe could benefit the State of Israel in some way in the future and... support them. Help them become scientists who are truly working for the good of the Jewish people, rather than slaving away in the academic rat race to get another paper published in a minor journal."

"And... what does one have to do in order to receive this support? Is there an application process?"

"Application process? No," said Yoav. "We are – how can I put it – 'proactive' in our search for those who we think meet our criteria."

"Well, I'm flattered," said Akiva. "So what's next? Is there some kind of interview?"

Yoav smiled warmly, his magnetic eyes still laser-locked on Akiva's. "You just passed it."





Minutes went by. Akiva's breathing was slowing, his nerve endings finally feeling less singed and raw. The future soothed his muscles, relieved the tension in his shoulders. He took a deep breath and resurfaced. He blinked as the fading light from the Tel Aviv beachfront entered his world again. He turned over and saw Shira standing above him.

"How long have you been standing there?" he asked.

"Only a minute or so. I've finished up the urgent stuff down there. Yoav came down to the lab and told us that he'd just been in with you. I wanted to see how you were doing but I know better than to disturb you when you're in recharge mode."

Akiva swung his legs onto the floor and sat back on the sofa. Shira sat down on the sofa too, not quite next to him, but not quite business-like distance apart either.

"Are you okay?" she said. She took a couple of the sofa cushions that Akiva's face had scrunched up, and started fluffing them out. She looked carefully at him. "Do you need more time? Do you need me to go?"

"No, it's fine," said Akiva. "I'm happy you're here. You're the only person in the world who knows that I do this."

"I'm the only person who knows lots of things about you, Akiva," smiled Shira. She moved across the sofa and hugged him chastely. "I'm happy to be here. I can't believe we've made it to this moment. I'm so proud of you, Akiva." She held on to the hug and her hand moved less chastely up to the back of Akiva's neck.

Akiva drew away. "I can't, Shira. You know I can't."

Shira took a deep breath. "I thought that... now that you've succeeded... now that we've made it to this point... maybe we could be free, be able to... We could be a project too. We once were. We could be again."

Akiva turned toward Shira and reached out for her hand. It was the first time

in years that he had held it. For a brief moment, it awakened memories in him, and suppressed emotions bubbled to the surface. Visions of family, warmth, happiness, Shira at his side over the next twenty years. He could tell Shira the truth. She could come with him. They could carry out his mission together.

But as he turned her hand over in his, he hit reality again. On the inside of Shira's arm was a row of numbers. 140602. Her grandmother's Auschwitz number. Akiva winced, staring at the number, unable to get past it, eyes drawn to it like a car crash. She'd had it tattooed there some years ago – it was a “thing” among many young Israelis. Akiva had been appalled when Shira had first shown it to him. *It's such a burden to have that on your skin, to see it every day,* he'd said. *No,* Shira had replied, *it's not a burden. It's a reminder. A reminder of our past. And our present. So that we never forget.*

Shira's tattoo had convinced him that he could never be with her in the long term, never tell her the truth about his real plan, about his dream, about his future. But now, as he intertwined his fingers with hers for the first time in years, with his other hand he caressed her skin under the tattoo, wondering...

“I don't know,” he said. “There are things... things about me... things that you don't know...”

“What are you talking about, Akiva? I know pretty much everything about you,” said Shira, keeping hold of Akiva's hand, her smile fading slightly.

Akiva continued tracing his finger slowly through the numbers:

1-4-0-6-0-2...

And back again... 2-0-6-0-4-1...

1-4-0-6-0-2...

“You don't...” murmured Akiva. “There are... there are things I've been hiding from you. Things that might make you hate me.”

“Nothing could make me hate you,” said Shira, a warm smile back on her face, her fingers squeezing his.

Akiva leaned forward and kissed her softly but briefly on the lips. “If you still feel that way in a few weeks' time, ask me again then.”

Shira furrowed her brow in puzzlement. “I don’t understand...”

“I... I promise – I’ll tell you more when I can. Go home and get some rest. I’ll help Sivan finish up downstairs. You can come back later and relieve her for the night shift.” Akiva paused and put his hand on her arm. “And please don’t mention any of this to Yoav.”

Shira crinkled her lips into a trembling smile and kissed Akiva gently on the cheek. She nuzzled herself briefly against his ear. “You dork,” she whispered to him. “You’re a silly, closed-in, dork. But you’re a good dork. A good man. I just wish you’d let me in.”

Akiva looked down at his hand, still entwined in Shira’s. “It’s... it’s so complicated... I just can’t...”

Shira disentangled her hand and stood up. She sniffed a little but took a breath and dusted herself off. “It’s fine, Akiva,” she said, forcing another smile onto her face. “I’ve trusted you every step of the way, you know that. What’s another few weeks?”

Akiva looked at her in silence for another long moment. He opened his mouth as if to say something. But before he could, Shira turned, opened the door, and left.

Akiva stood still, nodding softly to himself, looking at the closed door in front of him. A few more weeks. *Maybe*.

# Chapter 5

The sun began to set. The mother, a non-Jewish Romanian migrant-worker-turned-prostitute, was resting. In two days' time, on Friday, she would be paid handsomely and released, believing that she had carried a baby as a surrogate for a pair of rich North Tel Aviv yuppies. GeneLight's lawyer, Tomer Kleinberg, had drafted an iron-clad contract with her so that she would have no further claim on the child. In fact, she wouldn't even know how to begin looking for the child, or even for the facility: the contract had used a shell company, set up for this transaction and then immediately disbanded, with a PO box address that had been rented by another temporary shell company. When the time had come for the scheduled C-section, the mother had been sedated elsewhere by Sivan, brought in to the GeneLight laboratory under cover of darkness, and would be returned to her home that way too. Nothing had been left to chance; there were no tracks leading back to Akiva or GeneLight.

The whole project had layers upon layers of secrecy, sleights of hand, shell companies, misdirections of colleagues and friends, legal and semi-legal protections. Only a few people actually knew the baby's true identity, but there had been dozens of unwitting collaborators over the years; the Romanian prostitute was only the most recent.

Akiva walked out of his office, down the corridor, and took the secure elevator down to the lab. The GeneLight laboratory consisted of several rooms, all shining with white walls and metal surfaces, most of which looked like typical biogenetic laboratory environments. Akiva walked in with a self-satisfied grunt,

immediately buoyed by the familiar smell of disinfectant, by the clean, gleaming counters, by the soft whirr of the various machines in the background. He put his hands in his pockets and strolled around, tapping a hand on a metal table, peering at a setting on a refrigeration unit, adjusting a knob on one of the machines. Here he was a different person. Here self-confidence flowed through his veins. Here was his home, his castle.

At the far end of the lab was a door leading to a very different room: the operating theater for the birth, which had been fully equipped with everything you would expect at a first-class modern surgical facility.

Akiva breezed in. The mother had been removed to a separate, smaller, recovery room; the baby was in an incubator, asleep; and Sivan, the anesthesiologist, who doubled as GeneLight's Operations Manager, one rung below Akiva and Yoav, was clearing up some of the equipment from the birth and tidying the room.

"Shalom Akiva, mazal tov!" said Sivan, walking over to him to give him a hug. "I know how long you've waited for this, how hard you've worked."

Akiva glared at her. "*Du vergisst die Vorschriften!*" *You are forgetting the regulations!* He continued his reply in fluent German. "Remember: no Hebrew is to be spoken in the child's presence at any stage! The child must grow up hearing only German and speaking only German. This is *crucial* to the project's success."

"But Akiva, it's just a baby, and it's fast asleep," protested Sivan, still speaking Hebrew. "It doesn't matter yet at this stage..."

"It *does* matter, and we have to start now, right now," fumed Akiva in German. "Research shows that even newborn babies pick up the speech patterns of different languages. We need to begin the all-German environment from day one. This child must grow up as a German, hearing only German, imbibing only German culture, speaking only German. His genes will take care of the optics. We need to make sure that he sounds the part too."

"*Es tut mir Leid.*" *I'm sorry*, Sivan mumbled, this time in German. She

got back to work, tidying up medical implements and seeing to the various instruments around the baby's incubator. The staff of GeneLight had spent endless hours learning German. They had perfected their accents, worked on their fluency day after day, evening after evening. Akiva had stressed that this piece of the project's puzzle was no less important than the science.

Akiva sat down by the incubator looking at the sleeping baby, and Sivan peered over his shoulder.

"It looks a bit like my Meirav did when she was born," said Sivan, speaking softly now in German. "Is that a terrible thing to say?"

Akiva continued to gaze at the infant. "I don't think so. A lot of newborn babies look alike."

"I've been having more flashbacks since the birth," said Sivan quietly. "To the night they were murdered."

Akiva didn't respond.

"What we're going to do to this child..." said Sivan, "to this child, and to all the other ones afterwards, this will bring us redemption. No more Yosefs. No more Meiravs. No more Jews who will go through the pain that I went through. Right, Akiva? No more pain. No more murders. Never again."

Akiva swiveled around and looked deeply into Sivan's eyes. He put his hand on Sivan's arm, squeezed it gently and warmly, gave a brief nod. "That's right. *Never again.* No more pain." *And that, Sivan, is the truth.*

The two of them sat there in silence for a few more moments, gazing at the baby.

"Sivan," said Akiva, still in German. "Would you do me a favor and get me my notebook from the other room? Sorry, I just wanted to write down a few observations, but I think I left it over by the elevator."

"Of course," said Sivan. As she left the room, the door swung shut and she disappeared from view. Akiva craned his neck to make sure that Sivan was out of sight. Then, leaning down into the incubator, he kissed the baby's forehead, lovingly keeping his lips pressed to the child's warm skin for a moment as he

breathed in its newborn smell, stroking its soft wispy hair.

*“Mein schönes Baby,”* he whispered. *My beautiful baby. “Ich werde immer auf dich aufpassen.” I will always take care of you.*

*Never again,* Akiva repeated to himself. *That’s exactly right.* Things might not turn out quite the way Sivan and Yoav thought they would, but on this, at least, they agreed. This child would bring redemption.

# Chapter 6

The Jerusalem morning sun brightened the Knesset entrance courtyard as Hadas Levinson walked through its front gates the next day. As a backbench Member of Knesset, she had a small office of her own, but its claustrophobic sterility drove her crazy. She preferred the vibe of the shared space for parliamentary aides, elsewhere in the building, with its gray cubicles, battered desks and fabric-ripped chairs whose up-down mechanisms no longer worked; kind of like her old newsroom days. Hadas walked into the shared office and picked her way through an obstacle course of desks, chairs, and filing cabinets. The faint smell of stale tobacco hung in the air, despite the building's no-smoking policy. She made it over to one particular cubicle and tapped the woman sitting there on the shoulder. "No matter how early I get here, you're always here before me, huh?"

"Morning, Hadas." The aide swung her legs around and gestured back at her laptop. "Just working on the budget for the child benefits bill."

Hadas perched on a nearby chair and slung her briefcase on the floor. "Excellent. One step ahead of me as usual."

"How did the speech go yesterday?" asked Tzehainish. Tzehainish, an Ethiopian Jew whose family had been airlifted to Israel during the legendary Operation Solomon of the 1990s, had been Hadas's aide almost from day one.

"The speech? Grand total of nine MKs present in the chamber to hear it," replied Hadas, spreading nine manicured fingers in front of Tzehainish's face. "The coalition organized a boycott. All walked out before I even started



speaking.”

“Three guesses who was behind it,” said Tzehainish.

“I don’t even need to guess,” fumed Hadas. “I know it was Navon. One of his henchmen from the Ultra-Orthodox caucus walked up to me afterwards and bragged about it. ‘Message from Shmuel,’ he said to me. ‘This is what happens when you try to mess with us.’”

Tzehainish sighed. “He’s not your biggest fan, is he...”

“Well,” said Hadas, rubbing her hands together in devious irony, “I’m destroying the Jewish people, and all that.”

Tzehainish pretended to tear out her hair: a fantastic explosion of deep black curls which seemed to defy the laws of gravity. “Aargh... makes no sense!” she wailed melodramatically.

“Since when did you start looking for sense and logic in this building?” smiled Hadas.

A man walked into the office. He was in his early sixties, with graying temples and a loud tie. “I see that Ebony and Ivory are still plotting to change the world, then?” he announced.

“You know that if I ever want to destroy your career, I’ll just tell the press that you use those nicknames for us, don’t you, Benny?”

Benny Shoham laughed. He was one of the Labor party’s veteran politicians, one of Hadas’s mentors and favorite senior colleagues, with a second-to-none track record of anti-racism legislative work and political activism toward equal rights. But he also had a terrible sense of humor.

“See, Hadas, you’re making three serious mistakes in that statement,” he replied, wheeling over the biggest chair he could find, sitting grandly in it and putting his feet up on a nearby desk. “First of all, you assume that I have any career worthy of the name that is left to destroy. *Strike one*, as the Americans say. Secondly, they are not nicknames, they are terms of affection and endearment, the use of which to describe you makes literary allusion to the classic song by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder that talks of perfect harmony, which is

clearly your political and spiritual goal, and an admirable goal at that, in my humble opinion. *Strike two!* And thirdly,” he trumpeted, producing as if from nowhere that day’s newspaper, “There’s no such thing as the press any more. Our work is reported on by sweaty-palmed teenagers tweeting away in their bedrooms – they are our real masters.” He crumbled the paper between his hands and threw it theatrically over his shoulder. “So *strike three*, and we all lose!”

Hadas turned to Tzehainish. “See what I have to put up with? And you want to become a politician too? Are you nuts?”

Tzehainish nodded. “And he’s one of the good guys. God help us.”

Benny wagged a finger at Tzehainish with a comical *tsk-tsk*. “You see, that’s the problem with you traditionalists. Enough already with the belief in God!”

Tzehainish folded her arms and shook her head. “You know, Benny, it *is* possible to believe in God and still be a left-winger. If the Left wasn’t so condescending to traditional communities about their beliefs, more of them might vote for us.”

Benny raised his hands in mock surrender. “Do you think that the senators’ aides on Capitol Hill talk to them like this? Such insubordination! In any event, I wish it were otherwise, Tzehainish, believe me I do, but the right wing and the religious sector have practically become synonyms.”

He got up from his chair and ferreted around behind it for the newspaper he’d hurled over his shoulder. Tzehainish giggled at the sight of Benny crawling on all fours trying to locate the scrunched-up paper, which had somehow got lodged underneath a filing cabinet. “I actually need that damn paper for a meeting later, where the hell did it get to,” he muttered.

Hadas shook her head in exasperation at Benny’s antics but sighed at the real issue he’d raised. This was a conversation that they had had before, and she didn’t quite know which of her trusted friends and colleagues she agreed with. They were both right. She knew that her child benefits bill wasn’t making her any friends in the religious world, but she desperately hoped that some of the

more clear-headed religious leaders would finally agree to partner with her on it.

“I’m going to the bathroom. The two of you can carry on this fascinating conversation for a few minutes.” She turned to Benny, who was now safely ensconced back on his chair. “Maybe you can have a word with Shmuel Navon? You’ve co-sponsored stuff with him in the past, right? You have a decent history together? Do me a favor and have a quiet word?”

“I’ll try,” said Benny, straightening out the newspaper on his lap. “I don’t like my chances though.”

“Thanks,” said Hadas. “And Tzehainish – finish up the budget and email it to me when it’s done. I’ll be in my office. And then I want you to get in touch with Navon’s aide. His name’s Avi something, right? He seems a little more reasonable than his boss. Have a call with him, see if you can set up a meeting for the four of us, and we’ll try to talk sense to Navon one more time.”

“I’m on it,” said Tzehainish.

“You’re a doll, Ebony,” said Hadas, with a wink.

“No problem, Ivory,” grinned Tzehainish back at her.

“I’m honored that you see fit to humor an old man like me,” said Benny, clasping his hands together in a namaste.

“I’m going,” said Hadas. She walked a few paces toward the door, but then turned around. “And Benny: don’t try to steal Tzehainish again. She is *not* going to work for you.”

“Foiled again,” said Benny with a shrug.



Later that afternoon, Hadas and Tzehainish were sitting with Navon and his aide, trying desperately to persuade him to be more understanding of their position. It was not going well: they had had to sit through a twenty-minute lecture about the Jewish imperative to “be fruitful and multiply,” and how her bill was a direct attack on that Biblical commandment. Navon swayed back and

forth in his chair, stroking his bushy, gray-flecked beard, quoting Biblical and Talmudic passages, while Hadas waited for him to come up for air.

Hadas was finally able to protest. She drew herself up in her seat and placed a folder on the table between them, pulling out various charts and reports as she spoke. “You know as well as I do that the *Charedi* community needs to lower its birthrate. These families with seven, eight, nine children, it’s unsustainable economics. You suffer from overcrowding, housing shortages, unemployment... cutting child benefits for families with more than four children will still allow your communities to grow, but at a healthier rate, and in a more sustainable way. In the long run, my bill will *help* your constituency, not harm them.”

“Six million Jews,” boomed Navon, poking a finger in Hadas’s face, his other hand brushing away the documents on the table. “Six million Jews we lost in the Holocaust. My community are the ones trying to replenish those numbers. And not just the numbers: the culture, the Jewish learning, the life that was destroyed. How *dare* you try to take this away from us? How *dare* you say this is about economics?” Navon increased the urgency of his rocking back and forth in his chair, like a teacher in yeshivah coming to the denouement of a complicated piece of Talmud, adjusting the large black yarmulka on his head. “Every new Jewish child born is a cause for celebration, a blessing, a *mitzvah*. The State of Israel should be encouraging *more* Jewish children, not less. Your bill is an insult not just to us, but to the entire Jewish people! It is an affront to Jewish history!”

“Rabbi Navon,” said Hadas, trying to placate him, “please try to be reasonable. It’s—”

“Not everything is about reason, young lady,” snapped Navon, standing up. He put on his large black fedora hat, straightened it with a glare, and pulled his black suit together over his crumpled white shirt. “Reason has not helped the Jewish people survive for three millennia. The heart and the soul and the Torah – they have been our strength and our salvation. Reason, science, your so-called ‘enlightenment’ ... these will lead to the Jewish people’s destruction, God forbid.

I will not let that happen. Not on my watch. Your bill will not survive, and mark my words," he said, wagging his finger again at Hadas, "neither will your political career if you continue to pursue it."

And with that, Navon walked out.

"Avi..." Tzehainish appealed to his aide. "Maybe you could..."

"No can do," said Avi, shaking his head. "He's not going to budge. You need to drop it."

"Not going to happen," declared Hadas.

Avi shrugged his shoulders and jogged out of the room to catch up with his boss.



Hadas and Tzehainish trudged dejectedly out of the room.

"How dare he lecture us about Jewish history?" said Tzehainish indignantly. "My family walked to Addis Adaba for three weeks through the desert. My grandmother died of exhaustion and malnutrition on the journey. I sat with my mother in the shade of a tree while my father and brothers buried her by the side of the road. And then we carried on walking. And all because we dreamed of Jerusalem, we dreamed of Israel. He thinks that *I* don't care about the Jewish people?"

"It's impossible," sighed Hadas. "Impossible to get through to them. They use the same words as us, but they speak a different language."

They walked on in frustrated silence, heading back in the direction of Hadas's office. Rounding a corner, they passed a meeting room with a half-open door, and they saw that inside, six members of Knesset from a couple of the small Arab parties were having some kind of caucus meeting.

Hadas turned to Tzehainish and raised her eyebrows, her frustration at the previous meeting forgotten. "Shall we...?" she asked with a sly smile.

"After you, boss," her aide replied.

Hadas knocked on the door and without waiting for a reply, pushed it all the way open and walked in. “*Ahalan w’sabalan*, friends,” she announced, using the Arabic greeting. “Sorry to drop on you like this, but if you are plotting the destruction of the Zionist regime, you really ought to keep your door closed!” (Hadas was quite proud of this opening line; Omar would have approved.)

Hadas had good relations with three of the Arab MKs who were in the room. One of them, Mahmoud Zaid, was a man about her age, an Israeli Arab from the Galilee in the northern part of Israel, also in his first term in the Knesset, whom she’d interviewed a number of times in her journalism days. He beckoned her over to the table. One of his colleagues, an older MK whom Hadas knew less well, frowned at Mahmoud, and muttered something to him in Arabic.

“It’s okay, Tariq,” said Mahmoud. “She’s not like the others. Come join us for a few minutes, Hadas. How goes it?”

Hadas walked over to the table and shook Mahmoud’s hand warmly. She’d given him some advice on a bill he had worked on a few months ago, trying to get funding for road awareness training in the Israeli-Arab sector. The bill was currently buried in committee, but the collaborative experience had been a good one. Most of the Israeli-Arab MKs were usually quite radical in their attitudes toward the Jewishness of the State of Israel, and campaigned loudly that Israel should cease to be a “Jewish State” and instead become “A state of all its citizens,” which Jewish Israelis interpreted as dog-whistle code for the complete dismantling of Israel’s Jewish structures and roots. Mahmoud was more moderate; in one of his interviews with Hadas, he’d told her that he accepted that Israel would always have a Jewish character of some sort. “We want to be part of Israeli society, and we understand that this means speaking Hebrew and living in a country with a Jewish national character,” he’d said. “If you give Arab-Israelis equal access to this country’s resources, if you enable them to celebrate their Palestinian cultural and national heritage, and if you invite them into the leadership echelons of Israel with a sense of respect and dignity, then you will be surprised at how much they will be able to give. If you grant us

dignity as Palestinians on Friday morning then we will wish you *Shabbat Shalom* on Friday night.”

Hadas also happened to know that Mahmoud was an old friend of Omar, from their time studying at Haifa University together, and so she liked to touch base with him every so often just to see if there were any hints in his attitude to her that Omar had spilled the beans to him. But either Mahmoud was an extremely good actor, or Omar was keeping their secret as carefully as she was.

Hadas pulled up a chair and sat down at the table; Tzehainish hovered by the wall. “The truth is,” she confessed, “I’m having a miserable day. I’m trying to drum up some cross-party support for my child benefits bill, but I’ve just come from a rather dispiriting meeting with one of the *Charedi* MKs. You’ve said in the past that your voters also have big families and therefore that the bill would be a problem for you too, but I wonder if there’s any way you could reconsider that position?”

Mahmoud looked queringly at the MK who had frowned when Hadas walked in, and the older man gave a slight nod. “My teacher Dr Tariq Khalid and I were actually talking about your bill earlier,” said Mahmoud, making a deferential gesture to his senior colleague. “And we think there may be a way we could make some things work to all of our benefits. My road awareness bill is stuck right now, as you know. The committee member who is holding it back is a friend of yours, Benny Shoham. I don’t think he’s against the bill per se, but he has some kind of history with the chair of the committee, and he’s dragging his feet in order to piss him off.”

“That sounds like Benny,” said Hadas, exchanging a knowing glance with Tzehainish. “He can sometimes let personal vendettas cloud his broader strategic judgement. I’ll have a word with him. So... if I can get Benny to remove the blocks from your road bill in its committee, you’ll support my benefits bill?”

“We would certainly give it renewed consideration,” pronounced Mahmoud, smiling broadly and leaning back in his chair.

Hadas paused. She looked around the table. With the exception of Mahmoud

and the only woman in their group, each of them was a slightly different cookie-cutter copy-paste of the other. Middle-aged, graying Israeli-Arab patriarchs, each of them with bald patches, rolled up sleeves, nicotine-stained fingers, and waistlines spilling over their pants. The Israeli-Arab community remained for the most part a traditional, largely religious society, with women usually holding home- or education-oriented jobs and men as the communal leaders. She felt as distant from these dinosaurs as she did from the *Charedi* MK she'd just left. Her values – gender equality, science, progressiveness – were alien to both of these communities.

“You’ll give it renewed consideration,” Hadas repeated slowly.

“Indeed,” beamed Mahmoud benevolently.

“Not good enough,” countered Hadas. “Now listen here. I can be a valuable partner to you, Mahmoud. I am going to be the future leader of the Left, and I intend to be the future leader of this country. I’m not like the lefties of the past who hated Arabs only slightly less than they hated the Right. I genuinely believe in making Israel a place that gives you and your community respect, equal rights, a place at the table. A shared society. If it’s up to me, you’ll be a cabinet minister in my government. You know me well enough to know that those are truly my beliefs.”

Mahmoud nodded. “True.”

She got up from the table, walked round to Mahmoud, and swung his chair round so that he was facing directly at her. “But that doesn’t mean that I’m a soft touch. I know you think that I’m a pushover, that I’m a wishy-washy liberal who just wants to be nice to everyone. But make no mistake, when I make a deal with someone, I expect them to come through with their side of the deal.”

A shot of adrenaline pulsed through Hadas’s body, together with a sense of supreme calm and clarity about what she needed to do and say next. She leaned over him and spoke quietly, but loudly enough so that everyone in the room could hear.

“If you double-cross me, if you make a deal with me and then go back on it,



then you will regret it. I will come after every shitty little road bill you ever try to push through and make sure that it gets destroyed. I will find out who your worst enemy is and give him what he needs to out-primary you. I will make sure that you end up back in the local city council where you came from, deciding what day the trash collection should be on. Do you understand, Mahmoud? A deal is a deal as far as I'm concerned. You want me to help you with Benny, I help you. But then you help me with my bill. No ifs, no buts, no I'm so sorrys, no if only I'd knowns. I come through with my side, you better come through with yours. That's what it means to be equal."

At this, Khalid interrupted her. "How dare you speak to us like that?" he sputtered. And then, turning to Mahmoud: "I told you she was trouble. Listen to the way she talks to us. She's just like the other Zionists. You might be taken in by her, but I am not. I will not stand for this. Either she leaves now, or I do."

Mahmoud started replying to his senior colleague in Arabic. But Khalid waved him away and turned back to Hadas. "You will regret this, Levinson. My ancestors have lived in this land for hundreds of years. You Jews will not tell us how many children we should have. You will learn some respect."

He stood up straight and proud, turning his back on Hadas and facing his colleagues. "I say again. Either she leaves, or I do."

Mahmoud looked at Hadas and grimaced. "I'm sorry," he said. "I think you'd better go."

"It's fine," shrugged Hadas. "You figure out your internal issues without me." She walked toward the door, and addressed Mahmoud, pointedly ignoring Khalid. "Tzehainish will now give you her cellphone number. If you want this deal, then send her a message by the end of today simply saying 'yes.' If you don't want the deal, that's fine. I'll let Benny know that he can use your little road awareness bill as a never-ending store of shit that he can throw at that committee chair that he hates so much, and by the time the bill gets out of that committee we'll all have flying cars and you won't even need roads any more. But if you do want the deal, then you come through with your side of the bargain, and you

support my child benefits bill as if it's Palestinian sovereignty on the fucking Temple Mount."

And with that, Hadas opened the door and walked out.

Tzehainish hurriedly scribbled down her phone number on a piece of paper and put it on the table in front of Mahmoud.

"That's some boss you've got there," he muttered.

Tzehainish tried desperately not to grin so broadly.



Tzehainish jogged down the corridor and pulled up alongside Hadas. "God, I love it when you curse so much," she bubbled. "It's like your secret weapon! They *so* don't expect it from you, it seems so out of context with your lefty persona and your... you know... your hair and your good looks and all that, they think you're some Barbie bimbo or something, and then you open your potty mouth and it's like a neutron bomb, it's amazing!"

Hadas grinned at Tzehainish. "Ssh, keep your voice down. Don't give away all my trade secrets."

"Do you think it worked?" asked Tzehainish, almost skipping around Hadas like a schoolgirl. "Do you think they'll go for it? Maybe you went too far?"

"Let's wait and see," said Hadas. "Depends on whether Mahmoud can win that little generational struggle we just witnessed. Tariq Khalid is the old guard, and he's probably as suspicious of Mahmoud as he is of me. Anyway, let's go find Benny and tell him about the promises I've made on his behalf. No doubt I'll have to pay a price for that, that's the way it works. But it'll be worth it."

Benny Shoham was usually to be found holding court in the Knesset cafeteria, at a corner table that had been his informal fixed place for decades. He would sit at this table for hours on end some days, beckoning political friends and enemies over for coffee and meetings in the public eye, but in hushed tones: huddled conversations that were public enough for others to see who he was

talking with but private enough that their contents remained secret. The rest of the time he would sit there alone, eyes scanning the room like a Terminator cyborg, carefully noting away who was talking with whom.

They found Benny at his usual table. Hadas told him of the deal she'd suggested to Mahmoud.

"Shit, Hadas," sighed Benny. "I was having so much fun messing around with that committee chair. He's such an asshole. Oh well. I shall just have to find someone else to play with."

"Sorry to spoil your party," smiled Hadas. "So, Benny, what's the quid pro quo? What can I do for you as a thank you for this favor?"

"Well now, Hadas," said Benny, rubbing his hands together in exaggerated triumph, "I wouldn't do anything as simple as tell you straight away. My mind is a political bank account, and I remember everyone's—"

"Yes, yes, yes, we know," said Hadas. She made air quotes with her fingers. "Everyone's deposits and withdrawals, blah blah blah. I've heard you say that once or twice before..."

"Quite so," said Benny with a smile and a tilt of his head. "And I will call in my favor at the time and circumstance of my choosing."

Hadas shook her head in mock exasperation. Before she could respond, though, Tzehainish's phone buzzed, and she pulled it out of her pocket. She swiped it open, took a brief look, and held it up in the air like a trophy. "It's an SMS from Mahmoud," she said, and thrust the phone in front of Hadas's face. The message consisted of a single word.

*Yes.*

# Chapter 7

Akiva had slept fitfully and made his way back to GeneLight before the Tel Aviv rush hour. He went to check on the baby – Shira and Sivan were both there, doing the handover from one shift to another – and then went back up from the lab to his office. He sat there alone, gazing out at the Mediterranean, imagining himself soaring above it. A shiver of anticipation danced through his body and his shoulders twitched in a nervous spasm.

*Soon. Another few days. Two weeks, max. It's all going according to plan.*

He shut his eyes and let his dreams seep into his bones, oxygenating his blood, stretching his sinews. He saw Sivan and Shira, smiling, happy, grateful. Free from anger, free from pain.

*Never again.*

His mind wandered back to when he'd first learned of Yoav's plans for the project.

He remembered knocking on the door of Yoav's apartment, which was located in a quiet suburb of Jerusalem. By now, he was Dr Cohen: the previous year, he had received his doctoral degree with honors. Farbstein, the professor of the department, was nearing retirement, and Akiva was being spoken of as the likeliest candidate to replace him – a remarkable step for someone so early in his career. Akiva's research was shrouded in secrecy, but if three years ago, when he'd met Yoav on the Hebrew U campus, he had been unsure about whether or not they were ahead of the British team, he now knew that Farbstein's team – which was increasingly becoming Akiva's team, as Farbstein took more and

more of a back seat – was the leading biotechnology cloning team in the world. Their work was still out of the headlines, but that suited them well.

Yoav pulled the door open, his eyes gleaming, his smile wide, his presence as immediately overwhelming as usual. Over the past three years, Akiva had spent many hours with Yoav, basking in the radiation of his personality, constantly exhilarated by his endless energy, but, like Daedalus, trying not to fly too close to the sun. Yoav, while he wasn't a scientist, had an uncanny sense of what kinds of research moves might work, what kinds of questions to explore. He'd acted as a kind of advisor and sounding board for Akiva. And, of course, a funder: by now, Akiva had received thousands of shekels from Yoav's mysterious NGO, in return for which he had to submit only the most perfunctory of annual reports. Yoav assured Akiva that his own oral presentations to the NGO's board were the only thing that mattered.

The quiet suburb where Yoav lived was one of the most expensive of Jerusalem, and the apartment itself was outfitted to a level of style and quality that far surpassed Akiva's student digs. He stood in the doorway nervously, tapping his hands against the doorjamb, unsure of whether to enter. The smell of freshly-made popcorn wafted from the kitchen and saliva seeped between his teeth in response.

"Okay, what's the big excitement? Why are you dragging me here? I thought we were meeting at the cafe down the road?"

"No TV at the cafe," said Yoav, eyes still gleaming.

"We're watching TV? I thought we were going over that grant application that we nearly finished writing last week?"

"The grant can wait. You have to watch this movie first." Yoav produced a DVD and waved it in Akiva's face.

"The grant can wait? This is a first. You're the one who's always telling me that there's no science without money. The deadline for this application is next week, and it would really help with the research plans for the next few months."

Akiva could feel his face begin to flush, an internal sauna pumping heat into

his neck and cheeks, but the more he told himself to calm down, the more flushed he felt.

“Trust me. If we miss the deadline, I have a lead to some more private money that we can tap into,” said Yoav.

Akiva pursed his lips and took a step back, glancing uneasily up and down the corridor of the apartment building. “I’m not happy about all this private money we’ve been using lately. We’re a public university, we should rely only on transparent and public funding sources. I feel like I don’t even know who’s paying my stipend every month – it’s all these mysterious private donors that you bring in.”

“Look, we’ve been over this,” said Yoav, reaching out to Akiva, putting his arm around his shoulders, pulling him into the apartment. “We’re a good team. You’re a scientist, I’m an investment banker. You do the science; I do the fund-raising. You get your money to do your work, end of story.”

“And what do you get, Yoav?” asked Akiva, allowing himself to be guided in. His internal sauna dialed down a degree or two. “Don’t get me wrong – I’m grateful. I wouldn’t be where I am right now if it weren’t for you. But what’s in it for you?”

Yoav held up the DVD again and stopped smiling. The tone of his voice changed from friend to supervisor. “This is what’s in it for me.”

“Fine. You win, as usual.” Akiva slumped down onto the sofa. A gnawing feeling pulsed in the pit of his stomach, the same sensation he always got when Yoav outmaneuvered him.

Yoav wandered over to the fridge, pulled out a couple of beers, grabbed the fresh popcorn, and then knelt down by the TV. He put the DVD in the slot, and pressed play. “You ever heard of this movie?” he asked. “*The Boys from Brazil*.”

Akiva gave a puzzled look. “It rings a bell. Isn’t it something to do with Nazi hunters?”

Yoav nodded.

“Half-right. It’s something to do with Nazi hunters. But it’s something to do

with us as well.”

The title credits of the movie began to play. The movie was based on a 1976 book by Ira Levin. The plot imagined a group of Nazi geneticists who had preserved some of Hitler’s DNA and had impregnated dozens of women around the world with embryos that were genetically identical to Hitler. The crux of the plot was that since Hitler’s father had died when he was a teenage boy, the fathers of all these teenage boys also had to die, so that the genetic Hitler would have as similar an upbringing as possible to the real Hitler, raising the chance that one of these new Hitlers would develop the personality of the original, and lead the Aryan people into a Fourth Reich.

Akiva watched, transfixed. The end credits rolled, Yoav clicked off the TV and turned to Akiva.

“He was the worst, but he was neither the first nor the last. First it was the Egyptians, then the Amalekites, then the Greeks, then the Romans, then the Christians,” said Yoav, counting them off on his fingers like points in a debate. “Jewish blood has been spilled throughout history like water. And now the Arabs want their turn. Now *they* want to drive the Jews into the sea. *There will always be someone who seeks to destroy us.* Imagine if we could change that.”

Akiva stared at the blank TV, seeing only his own face reflected in it, not wanting to look at Yoav, not sure he could hide from Yoav the thoughts that were racing in his mind. “Yes,” he said softly. “Imagine if we could change that.”

## Chapter 8

They'd left Benny in the cafeteria rubbing his hands, promising to come up with a despicably evil favor that he would extract from Hadas as his quid pro quo for helping with Mahmoud's committee.

"He's all talk," smiled Tzehainish, as the two of them wound their way through the maze of Knesset corridors and stairways. People bustled around them: parliamentary aides running errands for their MKs, lobbyists walking languidly through the hallways as if they owned the place, the occasional cabinet minister on his or her way to a meeting, trailed by a bevy of assistants, journalists sniffing around for the latest piece of gossip, a bunch of teenagers on a high school trip. The atmosphere was more Middle Eastern *shuk* than the quiet hum of respectability found at the Houses of Parliament or the Capitol.

"Yup," grinned Hadas back at her, waving at the same time to someone she knew who was hustling in the other direction. "He's really a terrific mentor. He's looked out for me from my first day in this crazy building."

"It's not out of altruism, you know," said Tzehainish. "It's because he genuinely believes in you and thinks you're the great young hope of the party. Of the Left. I think he wants you to be his legacy."

"Maybe," shrugged Hadas. "That's a big word to hang around someone's neck, though. And listen, let's not delude ourselves – he has an ulterior motive too. He's looking ten or fifteen years down the line at the end of his political career, and he would love to be President."

"President... of course..." said Tzehainish, slapping her forehead. The two



of them rounded a corner and were blocked by a sudden exodus from one of the committee meeting rooms, representatives of NGOs scowling at the perfunctory treatment they'd just received, MKs hurrying off with cellphones pressed to their cheeks for imaginary "urgent" calls. "Why didn't I see that? Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're not a politician yet," said Hadas, putting her arm around her friend's shoulder. "But you will be."

The position of President of the State of Israel was a ceremonial and honorary one, with almost no actual powers, akin in certain ways to the role the Monarch plays in the United Kingdom. It was, however, an elected position, appointed every seven years by the one hundred and twenty members of Knesset.

They pushed their way through the crowd and Hadas stopped for a minute or two to exchange small talk with a couple of people. She was energized by this environment, every minute a decision point, every conversation one of potential import, every interaction a shot of caffeine to her soul.

"So," Tzehainish went on as they found themselves in some space again, "you think he's helping you so that one day, you'll bring the Labor party back into power, you'll be Prime Minister, and you'll help him become President?"

Hadas nodded. "Sure. He's the perfect candidate for President. Grand old man of politics, no scandals, worked across party lines, mostly uncontroversial. His only problem is that as long as the Right is in power, he's much less likely to get the nod. He jokes about it with me sometimes, you know. He'll say things like 'One day, you'll be PM, and I'll be President, and we can go for evening strolls together in Jerusalem,' that kind of thing. But I know it's not really a joke. The fact that Benny's never tasted real power hasn't quenched his thirst for it. I know that he acts like a big teddy bear with you and me, but he's ambitious and quite ruthless."

"Sounds like someone else I know," said Tzehainish.

Hadas grinned. "I guess that's why he likes me," she mused. "Anyway, I'm not going to get anywhere in this screwed-up building unless I'm ruthless. It's one

of the lessons that Benny has drilled into me.”

As they reached the door of Tzehainish’s office, they bumped into Avi on his way out.

“What are you doing here?” demanded Tzehainish. “Your space is on the other side of the building.”

“Oh... hi...” mumbled Avi. “I heard from Mahmoud Zaid’s aide that you made quite the impression there earlier. So I’m, um, just trying to check out if there’s any, you know, developments I should know about.”

“That’s typical,” said Hadas scornfully. “You know how to co-operate with the Arabs when it suits you. Well, you can stop sniffing around here and go report back to your boss that I’m going ahead as planned. I’ll get the votes I need.”

She opened the door to the empty office and walked in. Tzehainish darted past Hadas and plopped down on a chair. “Just warming it up for you, boss,” she grinned up at Hadas. “Can’t have the ‘Left’s Legacy’ sitting on a cold chair!”

“Let’s stick to Blonde Bitch,” said Hadas dryly. “I think I prefer that. Anyway – I’m getting out of here. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hadas turned to leave. “Wait,” said Tzehainish. “Your mail – I picked it up earlier. There’s a bunch of things – mostly business stuff, but there are a couple that look personal too.”

Hadas, having made a brief stop in the bathroom to don her brunette wig, drove out of the Knesset car park and made her way through the late afternoon Jerusalem traffic toward the hotel where she’d arranged to meet Omar that evening. She drove down Agron Street, past Independence Park, before entering the Mamilla outdoor shopping mall’s underground parking lot. She took the elevator to street level, and walked briskly down the swanky pedestrian street, where fancy jewelry and fashion stores basked in the shade of the adjacent Old City walls.

She turned right at the end of the mall and walked into the Mamilla Hotel: plush, boutique, exclusive. Her affair with Omar was an extremely expensive

hobby. At first, she'd insisted on paying for half the hotel bill each time but had quickly realized that her meager salary paled into insignificance next to Omar's wealth. She'd allowed her feminist discomfort at having the man pay for their intimate liaisons to be over-ruled by her amusement at the political irony that their relationship inverted the economic power structure of Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel.



An hour later, Hadas and Omar were lying in bed, naked and drowsy. Omar had put the TV on quietly and was propped up against some pillows watching a stupid Israeli sitcom that he was addicted to. (When Hadas had first found out about this little secret of Omar's, she'd made fun of him for watching such dross, but he'd replied "Know thine enemy, my dear, know thine enemy" and she'd rolled her eyes and let him get on with it.) Hadas had her head on his chest, playing absent-mindedly with his chest hairs.

The sitcom hit its commercial break and Omar pressed mute. "What's on your mind, parallel universe wife?" he asked.

Hadas looked up at him. "What are we doing?" she said. "We meet in secret hotel rooms, we have sex, we talk for an hour, and then we go off to our own separate lives."

"And Italy. Don't forget Italy," said Omar. A few months ago, Hadas had attended an EU conference in Rome on water resources. Omar had drummed up some business meetings there, and they'd managed to arrange a couple of free days in both of their itineraries when they'd been able to wander anonymously through the streets and piazzas. It had been risky – Israelis travel everywhere – but they had felt like a regular couple.

"But Rome only makes it worse, Omar," sighed Hadas. "It was so heavenly, it was so..."

"Normal?" suggested Omar. "Such a reminder of what we can't be here?"

“Yes,” said Hadas. “What we can’t be here. Are we ever going to get to have that here, Omar?”

“I don’t know,” said Omar. He wiggled down the bed in order to bring his face level with Hadas’s. “You know that’s what I want, right? This is not some kind of Arab boy fantasy of having sex in secret with the Jewish girl.” Hadas wouldn’t make eye contact with him, and he gently put his finger on her chin and pulled her face back toward him. “Hadas: I’m serious. I’ve never felt this way about anyone. I love spending time with you, I love talking with you. I wish you could meet my friends. I wish I could meet your friends. I wish that our lives could allow that. But maybe you and I aren’t destined to be normal. Not yet, anyway.”

Hadas leaned forward and kissed him. She picked up the remote and unmuted it. “Watch your show, Arab boy,” she said. “God forbid you should miss a scene. I’m going to check my mail – Tzehainish gave me a pile of stuff to look at.”

Hadas got out of bed, naked except for the Star of David necklace that she always wore. It had been the first piece of jewelry that she’d ever bought herself, a small star of 925 silver on a simple chain that she’d found in the *shuk* as a teenager. She played with it with her fingers as she padded over to the bathroom and put on a bathrobe and slippers. Having a rich boyfriend – even a secret Arab one – did have its advantages. Hadas hadn’t exactly been poor growing up, and she’d gone on vacations and stayed in hotels before, but never in expensive ones like this. The hotels she’d stayed at before meeting Omar had generally had threadbare towels and dirt in the corners; they certainly didn’t have the marble bathtubs that this one did. One of her other little secrets was that, despite being one of Israel’s foremost legislators and campaigners for environmental issues, she usually took a long, hot, water-wasting bath on Omar’s dime. She looked greedily at the bathtub with its gold faucets and expensive hotel toiletries arranged perfectly on its edge. “Just a few more minutes, my dear,” she said to the bathtub. “Work first, destruction of Israel’s water resources later.”

“Are you talking to the bathtub again?” shouted Omar from the bedroom.

“It’s more intelligent than that crap you’re watching,” shouted Hadas back.

“Touché again,” shot back Omar. “You Jews, you always have to have the last word with us Arabs, don’t you?”

Hadas beamed, her heart dancing inside her chest. God, she was happy. It was insane how happy she was with Omar. Happiness... not something she’d had much experience with in her life until she’d met him. Her childhood had been a tight knot of stress: the only child of a mother who was so immersed in her own traumas that she’d never had time for her daughter’s, and a distant father who worked long hours as a corporate lawyer and had little time for trivialities like a daughter or a family. Hadas had found an outlet from her mother’s tight-lipped pain and her father’s absences by becoming more and more interested in other people’s lives. She’d begun her journalism career as a student writer for the high school paper, or at least that’s how she framed it in her bio on the Knesset’s website. In reality, the “paper” had been a series of one-page character portraits of teachers and other students that Hadas wrote anonymously at semi-regular intervals, sneaking into the teachers’ lounge to photocopy her work and then sneaking into school first thing in the morning in order to distribute dozens of copies in classrooms before the other kids arrived. Her character portraits had been so spot-on, and so viciously accurate and well-observed, that she’d become known as “The Secret Sniper” in the school community.

She’d loved the anonymous celebrity of the whole thing. Eventually, she was found out – one day she got complacent and was seen by another student – but that actually made things even better, as the school principal realized what potential she had and encouraged her to tone down the viciousness but publish thoughtful interviews under her real name. That’s when she got really addicted to journalism, and from then she’d trodden a well-worn path through Army Radio, via Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University, to the Haaretz newspaper and a beginning reporter’s job at Channel Two news. Her ambition and her good looks had led her to an evening news co-anchor role.

Until one day, she'd woken up and decided that it wasn't enough to talk about other people making the news. She wanted to make the news herself. The easy (and often unethical) permeability between the media and the political world in Israel made it relatively easy for her to land a decent spot on the Labor party's election list. Now other journalists wrote about her, although she would sometimes make editorial suggestions. One of those suggestions had inadvertently created her new nickname. On the first year anniversary of her becoming a member of Knesset, a journalist had written a piece about her, and she'd told him about her high school jinks. Hadas had framed the interview as her path from writing about others to wanting to play her own role in creating Israel's vision and had suggested the title for the piece as "From Secret Sniper to Blonde Believer." It had been a great piece and had cemented her role as the Left's New Hope, but it had also given birth to "Blonde Bitch."

But in all these years, happiness had never really been part of her life. It was as if Hadas assumed that it just wasn't part of her equation – it was a missing variable, and she could have a perfectly efficient and useful life without it. Kind of like the old kibbutzniks, the grim-faced, unemotional generation of Israelis who just got on with it, struggling through life, overcoming war and poverty and hardship without stooping to such luxurious frivolities as laughter or humor or love. She'd had boyfriends and lovers, of course – but no-one who had touched her heart as Omar had.

She walked back out of the bathroom, and melodramatically did a sexy limbo-dance under the TV so as not to disturb Omar's line of sight. He chuckled. "Are you laughing at me or the TV?" she asked.

"I'll take the fifth on that one, I think, my dear," smirked Omar.

She giggled back, wandered over to the armchair in the corner of the room, and sat down, kicking off a slipper in Omar's direction. The slipper landed in his lap and he absent-mindedly tossed it back at her without taking his eyes off the television. Shaking her head with another contented little laugh, she emptied the bag of mail on to her lap. As Tzehainish had said, there were a bunch of

official notices and items of Knesset business, most of which could be thrown straight out (not in the hotel; Hadas was careful to leave no trace that nosey maids might pick up), but one or two of which needed some thinking about. There was an invitation to a caucus meeting that might or might not be a good idea for her to attend; she'd talk it over with Tzehainish and Benny tomorrow. And there was a response to a query she'd submitted to the Defense Committee about budgets for guards in the settlements – she had no doubt that they were hiding something about the vastness of those budgets, and she'd have to look carefully at their letter to see what her next move would be. But again, that could wait till tomorrow.

There was one final letter that looked personal – her name was typed on the envelope but the envelope itself contained no signs of letterhead or provenance. She shrugged, tore it open, glanced at its brief contents, and went white.

“Omar – turn off the TV,” she said.

“It’s nearly fini–” Omar began, but he cut himself off as he saw Hadas’s face, and immediately clicked the remote. “What? What is it?”

“We have a problem,” said Hadas, and gave him the letter. It was typed on a piece of non-descript card.

*I know your secret, you Blonde Bitch.  
Dump your little Arab boyfriend  
or I'll tell the Press.*