

CHAPTER 1



Moshe Karlin emerged from a deep and dreamless sleep with a premonition of impending doom. The world seemed out of place. The dawn chorus of summer birds filled his ears, but louder than usual, as though an entire flock had perched on the windowsill above his bed. The mattress pressed against his back, hard and coarse. A chill breeze tickled the hair on his bare chest.

Bare chest?

His eyelids snapped open. The endless blue velvet canopy of heaven stretched overhead, and as he gazed, a star winked out. His heart thumped in his rib cage. He was not in his bed. Or his bedroom. Or even his house.

He craned his neck forward. He lay on his back in a stony field, as naked as the day he was born.

His head slumped to the ground.

Moshe Karlin, you are in deep trouble.

Galit would kill him when he got home. That is, if she ever found out.

As his bold plan for sneaking home unnoticed grew flesh and sinew, the crackle of a loudspeaker jarred his thoughts, and a nasal voice boomed: *Allahu akba-a-ar! Allahu akba-a-ar!*

Moshe heard the East Jerusalem *muezzin* most mornings but always from a safe distance. This morning, however, the blaring call to morning prayers seemed to issue from only a stone's throw away.

Correction. You are in very deep trouble.

He rolled onto his side and scrambled to his feet, covering his privates with his hands. The field was perched on a hilltop. In the valley below, streetlights still burned and the Dome of the Rock glowed golden behind the ancient walls of Jerusalem's Old City.

A low rock wall snaked along the edge of the field and around the gnarled trunk of a large olive tree. Above the wall, rows of rounded headstones poked at the sky like accusatory fingers.

Moshe knew the cemetery well. His parents' twin graves lay a short walk away. He hadn't visited them lately but he was in no state to do so now.

How in God's name had he spent the night—naked—in the Mount of Olives Cemetery?

Hayya alas sala-a-ah! Hayya alal fala-a-ah!

A ball of searing pain burst behind his right eyeball. He fell to one knee and released a hand from modesty duty to massage his temple.

Of course! His birthday party last night. He had sipped a glass of Recanati Merlot as he discussed his business plans with Galit's grandmother. He had looked about for Galit and then... a black interplanetary void. He had never drunk to blackout before, not even in his single days, but that would explain the headache. It might also help explain his current predicament.

The *muezzin* call ended.

He glanced at his wrist and swore under his breath. His watch—his dear father's Rolex, the heirloom from his grandfather—was gone. Moshe took it off only to shower. One person alone would dare take his watch. One person alone would abandon him overnight and buck naked in an East Jerusalem graveyard. Moshe would deal with him later. For now, he had to get home.

He hobbled in the twilight toward the access road—rough and

lacking shoulders—that bordered the field. Sharp stones bit into the tender soles of his feet. The headache spread to his left eye and throbbed with his every step.

With luck, he'd avoid early-bird terrorists. With more luck, he'd slip under the covers before Galit got up to dress Talya for kindergarten.

He quickened his pace. A truck whooshed along a hidden street far below. Thankfully, the access road had no streetlights. As the road fell, walls of stone rose on either side.

Through a breach in the wall, he spied a yard with a clothesline. He reached through the hole and, with some effort, snagged the edge of a bedsheet. After brushing dirt and leaves from his goosefleshed body, he fashioned the sheet into a crude toga. His new attire would still draw stares but the sheet was dry and covered the important bits. He lacked only a laurel wreath to complete his Roman emperor costume. Pity it wasn't Purim today. He would have blended right in.

The road meandered around stone houses with dark windows and emptied into a two-lane thoroughfare. Sidewalks. Streetlamps. Civilization. He flagged down a white taxi and climbed into the back seat.

"Shimshon five," he said.

The driver, a young Israeli in a leather jacket, started the meter, and the car pulled off.

Moshe inhaled the sweet scent of new leather. He had worked with taxis all his life but he had not hired one in years. The upholstery felt soft and smooth through the thin sheet.

Eyes watched him in the rearview mirror and they crinkled at the edges. "Wild party, huh?"

Details of the previous night surfaced in Moshe's bruised brain. "My fortieth birthday," he said. "My wife threw a party at the Botanical Gardens."

He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth. Karlin & Son ran the largest taxi dispatch service in Jerusalem and he did not need this story circulating among the city's cabbies.

The driver, however, did not seem to recognize his voice. Newbie. Of course—who else drew the graveyard shift?

The eyes in the mirror narrowed. “Botanical Gardens?” he said. “That’s the other side of town.”

Newbie or not, he knew the lay of the land. The Italian restaurant at the Botanical Gardens overlooked a large pond in western Jerusalem. Moshe had sipped his merlot and told Savta Sarah of his plans to extend Karlin & Son from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. They already controlled the shuttle routes to Ben Gurion Airport. He had looked around for Galit. He had wanted to raise a toast in her honor. They had hardly spoken with each other all day and, with his recent work schedule, they had spent little quality time together. He had wanted to tell her how much she meant to him. Where was she? And then... another gaping abyss in his memory.

“Avi,” he said. He spat the word like a curse.

“Who?”

“My friend.” The word “friend” dripped with sarcasm. “He’s always trying to drag me to nightclubs like the old days. Last night, I guess he succeeded.”

Moshe massaged his temples with his fingers. He needed an Acamol.

The driver laughed. “With a friend like that, who needs enemies, right?”

After a short, annoyed pause, Moshe laughed as well. In the safety and comfort of the backseat, on his way to his warm home, the stunt seemed harmless enough. Hilarious. A juicy story for the grandkids. *Did I tell you the one about my fortieth birthday? Now that was a bash to remember. Or not!*

The road rounded the high crenellated walls of the Old City, hugged Mount Zion, and dipped through the Hinnom Valley.

Avi, you crazy bastard. They say you can choose your friends—but that wasn’t always true. Moshe could never shake off Avi, practical jokes and all. Too much history. And Moshe had given him a job at Karlin & Son. They ran the business together.

You overaged rascal. The time had come for the eternal bachelor

to settle down. A wife. Kids. He'd have a word with him later in the office, if he even showed up after last night. He was probably hung over too. Ha!

The trickle of cars thickened on the triple lanes of Hebron Road. God turned His great dimmer switch in the sky and the heavens brightened.

Forty years old. How time flew by! He didn't feel forty. The Israel Defense Forces had released him from reserve duty, all the same. He had many reasons to be grateful: a loving—if stormy—wife; a delightful little girl; a booming business and a beautiful house; and a best friend who moved mountains to create an unforgettable fortieth birthday surprise. Perhaps *unforgettable* was not quite the right word.

The cab turned into the suburbia of the German Colony, past the sleepy storefronts, apartment buildings, and houses in white Jerusalem stone.

He'd sneak another hour of sleep before heading to the office. He'd drive to Tel Aviv and nudge his list of cab operators and independent drivers to sign on the dotted line. *First, we take Jerusalem,* he thought, channeling Leonard Cohen's baritone, *then, we take Tel Aviv.*

An invisible hand moved him, pushing him harder and farther. After Tel Aviv, he'd spread north to Haifa, and south to Beersheba. Within a few years, he would conquer the entire country, one cab at a time.

A dark cloud settled over his mind. What then? Was that to be his sole "dent in the universe"?

He yawned and shook the dreary thought from his head. The hangover—or an on-schedule midlife crisis—had hijacked his brain. A national dispatch network would be a fine achievement. His father, of blessed memory, would be proud.

The car pulled up beside Moshe's duplex on Shimshon Street. The driver stopped the meter and printed a receipt.

Moshe reached for the wallet in his back pocket and got a handful of buttocks. No wallet. No underwear either. He decided

to keep that information to himself.

“Wait here a moment,” he said. “I left my wallet at home.”

He skipped up three steps of cold stone and slid the spare key from beneath a potted plant. A row of purple cyclamens caught his eye. When did Galit get those? Takeaways from the Botanical Gardens?

He unlocked the door, tiptoed inside, and padded down the hall. In a drawer of the telephone table, he found a fifty-shekel note among the memo pads, pens, and car keys. He handed the driver the money through the open car window, told him to keep the change, and hurried back indoors. All he needed was an insomniac neighbor to spot him wearing a borrowed sheet. People loved to talk.

He closed the door behind him with a soft click. Silence in the dim entrance hall. *So far, so good.* He climbed the staircase tile by chilly marble tile, then eased down the handle of their bedroom door and slipped inside.

Shutters down and door closed, the room sank in Egyptian darkness. He inched over the cool parquet toward the sound of soft breathing until his leg touched the hard edge of the bed frame.

He let the sheet slip from his shoulders to the floor and kicked the pile under the bed. Never mind pajamas—the creak of a closet door might wake her. He lowered his rump to the soft bedsheets, transferring his weight ounce by ounce. Not a single spring squeaked. The mattress upgrade had proved to be a good investment.

He leaned back, slipped his legs beneath the covers, and rested his head on the pillow.

Mission accomplished!

He exhaled a lungful of pent, anxious breath and shifted further onto the bed. The surface of the mattress sank. Galit must have rolled onto his half of the bed. He turned toward her. The warmth of her body radiated through her pajama shirt. He pressed his shins against her hairy legs.

Hairy legs?

A reflex fired in his brain stem. With a primordial cry—*wooo-aa-ahh!*—a mixture of terror and revulsion, as though he had snuggled up to a large cockroach, he sprang out of bed.

CHAPTER 2



Moshe stood barefoot in the darkness of his bedroom. His entire body quaked.

“What’s that noise?” said Galit’s voice, thick with sleep.

Before Moshe could answer, a man said, “Who’s there?”

There was a loud click. Yellow light flooded the room and seared a horrifying image in his brain. Two figures lay in his bed: Galit and another man.

Moshe froze, his eyelids shuttering in the bright light. The two sleepers gawked at him. Their eyes moved from his face to his nether regions. Moshe didn’t care about that—he had other things on his mind right now.

The man brushed a fringe of oily hair from his face.

“Avi?” Moshe said. Shock gave way to disbelief. Then rage shoved them both aside. He stood over them, a lone accusatory presence. “What the hell are you doing here?” he roared, as though he hadn’t figured it out for himself.

His ex-best friend blinked at him as though Moshe had just stepped off the ramp of a steaming spaceship. He didn’t grab his clothes and flee out the window. He didn’t beg for his life or claim that this was “not what you think.” Instead, he slunk out of bed and reached a quivering hand toward him. When his