

ACTS OF SEPARATION

Graham Hurley

“If a man wishes to be sure of the road he treads on, he must close his eyes and walk in the dark.”

- *St John of the Cross*

“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp. Or what’s a heaven for?”

- *Robert Browning*

Charlie McGuigan

One

I'm late for the final fitting. They've flown in the old man from Hebron. As far as I understand it, he learned his craft during the Second Intifada, spilling much blood, solving nothing. Now he occupies room 235 at the Travelodge in Finchley Road.

His flight got in late last night and he hasn't slept. He's exhausted and it shows in the darkness beneath his eyes. Like a good Arab, he offers me hospitality. Tea or coffee, my friend? He gestures at the electric kettle, at the nest of sachets beside the TV. Neither, *shukran*.

I've eaten earlier before taking the train to London. At dawn, I had bread and cheese with thin rings of red onion and a couple of slivers of tinned anchovy. The anchovy was dry because I'd left the open tin in the fridge for a couple of days. This is a small detail but I guess important if you know you'll never eat again. Something in the first mouthful was crunching between my teeth and I realised they were tiny crystals of salt from the anchovy. Sharp. Tangy. Not unpleasant.

The old man wants me to take my T-shirt off. He's sitting on the bed, watching my every move with an interest I can only describe as professional. This man has sent countless martyrs to their deaths, a key link in the chain between insane religious commitment and tomorrow morning's headlines. They tell me he's never made a dud, never dropped a stitch. His work is 100%, always works first time. Here's hoping.

"Please," he gestures at my T-shirt again.

I strip. I feel no shame, no embarrassment. The sight of my tattoo, the tiny blue fish, brings the ghost of a smile to his face. For a moment, I wonder whether he's going to ask me whether I've washed, whether I've prayed, whether I've made some kind of farewell video. But he has something else on his mind.

"You know what that means?" He struggles to his feet and touches me lightly on the right bicep.

"It's a fish," I say. "I like fish."

"But the meaning? You know the meaning?"

"It's a fish", I repeat with a shrug. Maybe I should have said yes to coffee. Just to shut him up.

He shakes his head and gives me a strange look, bemusement tinged with something close to disappointment, as if I owe him a conversation. I owe him nothing. I want him to make the last adjustments, explain how the thing works, and then leave the rest to me. I want out of here. I want to be back outside, back on the streets, wearing my own death and the deaths of countless others. I want to be half a second away from the moment when I can play God. Playing God is something I've never done in my entire life. And the irony, of course, is that I've never felt more *alive*.

Mansour's people in Nablus call it The Vest, a cartoon phrase I imagine they use in order to spare themselves and everyone else the darker implications. The garment is made of cotton, a light shade of olive, and the old man has laid it carefully on the spare bed. He put it together after I supplied the measurements last month, once Mansour was satisfied I was serious. When the old man picks it up and hangs it beside my upper torso it looks like a waistcoat. Sleeveless, it has panels back and front for the thin sheets of Ceramico, an explosive I'm assured is state-of-the-art, plus a couple of extra pockets for the electronics that will blow me apart.

"Did they tell you about the word?"

"They did."

"And you have it up here?" He taps his head.

"Yes."

This is the cleverness, the technical advance I'm assured is a stroke of genius. Most of these devices are physically triggered. Blowing yourself up demands hitting a button or flicking a switch. That's what the security guys look for, the tell-tale movement of the hand that gives you away. The half-second that follows can – literally – make the difference between life or death. The best guys can shoot you before you hit the button. Not for me. I want to be in sole charge. I need to know that a single word, a word I've chosen, a word that no one else will ever use on my last day on earth, will bring it all to an end. My terms. My choice of time, of

location, of opportunity. They call it voice-activation. One word. Mine. Then darkness.

The old man slips the vest over my head. His hands are rough against my skin. He tugs it this way and that, then stands back, his head cocked, assessing the fit. It feels on the tight side.

“OK?”

I frown. I take a deep breath. The cotton gives a little and the vest feels suddenly like a second skin, something that’s been waiting for me all my life. Clever.

“It’s fine,” I say. “Perfect.”

The old man nods but says nothing. The vest has evidently been mailed to the UK ahead of his arrival, a sensible security precaution. I know this because Mansour told me and because there’s a jiffy bag open on the bed. I try to read the address but I can’t. Someone – presumably the old man – has covered the address with thick black Pentel. Another wise precaution. What if I’m a plant? What if I’m here to keep my eyes open, to memorise the old guy’s face, to gather every clue I can, to step out of this soulless hotel, make a call or two, and wait for the cavalry to arrive?

The thought amuses me. The old man is smiling, too. He knows exactly what I’m thinking. In the face of temptation, he waves a thick bent forefinger.

“You’re a reporter, no?”

“A writer.”

“Same thing, no?”

“Sometimes.”

“Big story?” He gestures at the waistcoat.

I shrug. In one way I’d like to think so. In another, I don’t really care. Another dozen bodies in the bloodbath that is breaking news? Is anyone really counting anymore?

The old man is sitting on the bed again. His bag is at his feet. He unzips it. Inside, on top of the carefully folded clothes, is something putty-grey, double-wrapped in plastic and then taped. He produces a knife and cuts through the tape. This, I suspect, is the explosive, another technical advance. He would have collected

it from somewhere local. No way has this stuff been anywhere near an airport scanner.

The old man has a pair of rubber kitchen gloves, yellow, slightly too small. Watching him struggling into them I find myself wondering – not for the first time – about the sheer reach of Mansour's people. On first acquaintance, months ago in Nablus, it was easy to dismiss them as a bunch of fundamentalist cowboys, wedded to jihad and immortality, but everything I've seen since tells me they're far more organised and far more dangerous than that. Not once have they missed a rendezvous. Never have they taken an unnecessary risk. In the swamp of the Middle East, fieldcraft is everything. Lose your concentration, underestimate the reach of the enemy, and you'll end up on the wall of martyrs before you've had a chance to make your mark, one more face amongst the ghosts of the fallen.

The old man has spread a plastic cover on the bed and is rolling out the sheets of the explosive. Mansour – my tour guide into the world to come – assured me that this stuff is future-proof. The explosive is impregnated with specks of ceramic, diamond-sharp needles that blast outwards, tearing into flesh and bone at the speed of light. I queried the last bit, thus earning myself a peek at Mansour's favourite video.

The room was small and bare. Two animals were involved. The first was a sow. She'd been draped in a corset of this same grey putty. She nosed around, looking up from time to time. Then, in the time it takes to blink, she exploded. There was nothing left of her, literally nothing except a thick visceral stain on the floor and walls, scarlets and yellows and a deep, deep purple. A film of the stuff even coated the camera lens. In the brightness of the blast room, this was the sunset of your worst nightmare. Except there was more to come.

The second animal was a monkey. Monkeys, as far as I know, are brighter than sows and this one was definitely worried. The waistcoat didn't fit properly. He kept plucking at it. Sometimes he tried to bite it. He knew something was wrong.

I remember staring into his face as he approached the lens. There was anguish and a kind of despair in his eyes. Maybe they hadn't cleaned up properly after the sow. Maybe he could smell what awaited him. Either way, the result was the same. Except, for whatever reason, his departure was prefaced by a voice

intoning the Salat Al-Isha, the Koranic Night Prayer. Sows don't figure much in the world of Islam. Monkeys, on the way to being human, obviously deserve a gesture of farewell. Neither video sequence carried sound effects. Which made the impact even more unnerving.

The old man is now busy shaping the rolls of Ceramico to my body. He slips them into the panels he's prepared in the vest and pats them into shape. Expended bullets smell of cordite. Semtex smells of almonds. Nuclear explosions, so I'm told, smell of lightning strikes. To my surprise, the stuff smells of nothing. Another first.

"You feel OK?"

"I feel fine."

"Not too heavy?"

"No."

I mean it. I could wear this garment all day, walk right across London, run for a bus, try a gentle jog in the park, and it wouldn't bother me. Death is a burden to be borne lightly. Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Ozymandias*.

The old man has stepped back again. It seems his work is nearly over. He tells me to stretch left and right, then to touch my toes. I perform as directed, aware of his eyes on my body. Then he nods at my T-shirt. I slip it over my head. My handler had told me to wear something loose, maybe half a size too big, and now I understand why. No one would ever suspect what I really had on, what I really intended, how the long day to come would unfold.

The old man is pleased. He shepherds me across to the full-length mirror, much the way a bespoke tailor might. A hand-made garment. For a very special occasion.

"OK?" he asks again.

"Perfect."

A big smile this time. He knows my admiration is unfeigned though I sense he'd still enjoy a conversation. Why I volunteered. How I'm feeling. Whether or not I'll really have the courage of my proclaimed convictions. Alas, I disappoint him a second time.

"What about the word?" I ask him. "The word that sets it off? Do I record it, or what?"

He nods. His hands are back inside his bag. When they emerge, he has a tiny wafer in the palm of his hand. It looks like a camera card. He slips it into what must be a recording device and shows me how to set the machine running before he uncoils the wire from a miniture microphone and plugs it into the machine. Then, without a backward glance, he steps into the bathroom and locks the door.

I sit on the bed and pick up the recording machine. I can hear the muted thunder of traffic from the Finchley Road. Miles away, the whine of an incoming jet. Much closer, the light voice of what must be the hotel's cleaning woman moving from room to room. She's singing something from one of the Andrew Lloyd Webber shows. *Evita?* I've no idea.

I make sure the door is locked then settle on the bed again and reach for the machine. I press the Record button. The tiny microphone is like a ripe fruit between my finger and thumb, something I might have plucked from an over-hanging branch. It carries the forbidden promise of untold delights. It will take me where I know I need to go. Room 235, I think. My Garden of Eden.

For some reason the word must be at least two syllables. I tilt back my head, and clear my throat, wondering about delivery, about tone of voice, about performance, wondering whether any of this shit really matters. Then my head comes down again. One word. One chance. There. Done.

The old man emerges from the bathroom a couple of minutes later. To complete the charade, he's had the grace to flush the toilet.

"OK?" He's looking me in the eye.

"Fine," I've picked up my shoulder bag and I'm already heading for the door. "Thanks for your help."

He calls me back. After he's checked the recording and taped the microphone to the base of my neck, he extracts the little card and asks me to pull up my T-shirt. I can't see what he's doing but I feel his fingers beneath my rib cage. A second adjustment gives me the back-up option I've insisted on.

If I'm unable to trigger the voice activation, all I need do is enter a four-digit number of my choice on the keypad of my smart phone. I handed the phone over to a guy I met at Paddington Station three days ago. I've no idea what they've been doing with it since, but I gave them the number I'd chosen and I assume they've

made whatever adjustments are required. In one sense it's good to have my phone back. In another, it feels like a stranger, full of dark promise, a second step into the void in case the first one doesn't work.

The old man has finished. He turns me round, nods at my chest, and tells me not to touch anything. From now on, I've joined the walking dead.

He extends a hand and holds mine for a long moment.

"Ma'a salama" he whispers. *"Goodbye"*

Two

It's chilly outside. Standing on the kerbside, wondering what to do next, I'm slightly dazed. There are buses in both directions. One will take me to Hampstead Heath. I have nearly £300 in my pocket, more if you count my store of New Israeli shekels. I could ride the Tube. I could get a cab to take me to the nearest currency exchange and swop those shekels for sterling. I also have a Visa card with £2814 unused credit. Shouldn't I be recycling all this money? Shouldn't I be putting a smile on the faces of complete strangers?

On your last day on earth, these are important decisions. Within hours, I'll have little need for a conscience but in my business you get to understand the language of small gestures and it might be nice to spread a little goodwill. On the other hand, what I've decided to do has begun to confuse me. This isn't as simple as I'd once thought. Far from it.

I linger beside the bus stop a moment longer. I spent some time in Tel Aviv during the Second Intifada way back in 2002 and I know first-hand what a couple of kilos of TATP can do to a crowded bus. It happened near the Great Synagogue in Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. I was a hundred metres or so down the road. As a freelance journalist, I'd just filed a lengthy feature piece I'd been incubating over the past couple of weeks and I was thinking about something to eat. What sticks in the memory is the soundscape after the blast. A moment's silence after the hammerblow of the explosion, then gasps, and screams, and the wail of a trillion alarms, shops and cars, triggered by the pressure wave.

I remember the shiny pebbles of glass crunching underfoot as I began to run, and the black oily smoke swirling towards me, and then the bitter chemical taste of yet another headline in the back of my throat. After years of trying to coax nuance and the subtler flesh tones out of my reportage, this was the first time I'd witnessed a suicide bomber at work and I was overwhelmed by what he'd done: so sudden, so violent, so *ugly*. Fumbling for my phone, I was already trying to put this feeling into words. My editor on the features desk in London, under the circumstances, was

remarkably patient. She wanted facts, figures, not my shocked attempt to describe what it felt like to be a witness to this carnage. As it turned out, Hamas killed six people that morning.

The bus is approaching fast. The woman beside me half-steps into the road and extends her hand. She's young, black, pretty. She's humming a song I happen to like. I decide not to take the bus. I decide to spare her, should something go wrong. I decide to walk.

Less than an hour later, I'm sitting on a bench beside a kids' play area on Hampstead Heath. It's November now and I can taste winter in the air. Barely metres away, a little girl of maybe five or six is trying to coax some action out of a swing while a woman I take to be her mother sits cross-legged beside the buggy, head turned away, studying her smartphone. The little girl's name is evidently Athenie.

Athenie reminds me of Carragh, my own daughter. She twists the seat of the swing round and round, plaiting the chains then letting go and stepping back, trying to attract her mother's attention. Her mother isn't interested. I'm staring at the little girl and I smile when she risks a glance in my direction. She smiles back, pleased that someone has noticed her.

I last saw Carragh eleven years ago. She and her mum, Roz, had moved to the country. There was a new man in both their lives, Mark, and he made a decent living as plasterer while trying to do up a wreck of a cottage in the wilds of rural Essex. I'd no idea how Roz met him, but he obviously did it for her and that made me very happy. After the shambles of our marriage, Roz deserved a break.

I took Carragh off to the seaside as a treat. It was high summer, brilliant weather. Carragh was as trusting and talkative as ever and we shared an afternoon I've treasured ever since. At that point I'd obviously no idea about Mansour's plans for what was left of my future but I'd been aware for a while that my life was spinning out of control and that afternoon on the beach at Clacton-on-Sea was like a collection of black and white postcards, a brief reunion with the person I must once have been. We built sandcastles. We hired a couple of deck chairs. We splashed in the shallows. We played hide and seek along the line of seafront beach huts. My

little girl even got the beginnings of a suntan, a scarlet blush of colour she was proud to take home. Dusk was falling as I drove away from Mark's cottage and she hung on the gate, waving until I rounded the bend and disappeared.

Athenie's mum seems nervous about my presence. She gathers her daughter into the buggy and pushes her down the grassy slope towards the road. I give Athenie a little wave as she disappears, and she waves back. Then I dip into my shoulder bag and fetch out my newly returned smartphone to browse the dozens of seaside pix I took that afternoon at the seaside. I've paused on a favourite shot – Carragh semi-naked, kneeling behind the wall of sand we'd thrown up against the rising tide - when I become aware of an approaching figure. He's wearing jeans and a blue hoodie over a collarless white shirt. He hasn't shaved for a while and he offers a brief smile before he sits down beside me.

"Cold, yeah?" He speaks with a foreign accent I can't place. He looks Eastern European.

I agree it's chilly. I close my smart phone. We talk for a minute or two, mainly about football. He says he loved the way the Algerians played in this year's World Cup, especially against the Germans. Then he takes a knife from his pocket and holds it lightly against my ribs. I can feel the point of the blade beneath the thin wafer of explosive.

"Your wallet," he says. "And your phone."

I try to protest. To reason with him. I even attempt to buy him off. Fifty quid if he'll leave me alone. He laughs softly, helps himself to my phone, takes my wallet. Mercifully, the bag with my laptop is under the bench.

I look into his face. I feel no fear. I could do it now, I think. One word and both of us would be history.

For some reason, he's smiling at me. The smile feels close to an apology. This is a man with manners, I tell myself. Why on earth has he stooped to this?

Then he's on his feet and away, running lightly towards the busy main road, exactly the same route that Athenie and her mum have just taken. If only they'd stayed, I think. If only.

It takes me longer than it should to realise I'm in a very bad place. My mugger has disappeared but given what I'm wearing I can hardly go to the police. I

make my way back to the main road, trying to compute the chances of this man happening on my four-digit combination by chance.

If he puts together 1717 as part of a phone number or a text, I'm history rather earlier than I planned but the more I think about it the more the odds appear to be in my favour. Bike locks, for instance, often have four tumblers. The odds against scoring a 1717 straight off must be huge. This is reassurance of a sort, but the thought of my killer phone in someone else's hands still bothers me. Choosing the time and the manner of your own death is one thing. Entrusting it to a stranger and to fate is quite another.

A single trigger word, on the other hand, has a simplicity and a sweetness that I find deeply empowering. Words, after all, are my business. Live by the pen, die by the pen. But four digits in the hands of a stranger? I'm tempted to phone the bombmaker, the old man from Hebron, and ask for advice but even if I had his number, I can't. I have my laptop and I could try and send him an e-mail but again I have no contact details. Maybe there's another way. Maybe the old man's still at the Travelodge.

A passing cab takes me back to the Finchley Road in minutes. I have enough change for the fare in my pocket and I always keep a debit card separate from my wallet just in case I ever get mugged. The girl in reception at the hotel tells me the room's already been re-let. As far as the old man's concerned, she has no contact details she's prepared to release and when I press her harder, she shoots me a look that tells me to stop asking questions. Mansour, for reasons I understand all too well, told me never to leave a trace wherever I chose to spend my last day. You're a ghost already, he said. You have to be invisible. You have to be of absolutely no consequence to anyone who might cross your path.

He's right. I know from the girl's face he's right. Back in the street, alarmed by my lack of cool, I drift south with the late morning shoppers. I need a coffee. Badly. This thing is beginning to run away with me.

An hour or so later, I'm sitting in a café on the Edgware Road. The area is full of Arabs, young, sleek, arrogant, doubtless monied. On the West Bank, we'd call them "Gulfies". They park their Porsches on double yellows. A six hundred quid release fee means nothing. They sit under the big heaters at the best pavement

tables, conducting deals on their cell phones, or maybe just shooting the breeze with old mates in Dubai or Qatar. In ways that remind me of dirt-poor families in Nablus or Jenin, they seem to defy gravity. The world goes on. Shit happens. Never weaken. Keep talking. And me? I'm still trying to work out whether I've just handed what remains of my life to a stranger.

1717. The number won't leave me alone.

Three doors up from the café is a branch of Vodafone, my service provider. Before settling at my café table, I've spent the last quarter of an hour explaining how I've lost my smart phone. No idea where it's gone. Maybe I left it on a bus, maybe on the tube first thing, God knows. What I want now, I told the guy behind the counter, is a block on the account, a guarantee that whoever found my phone can't use my precious credit to phone his mates in Sydney.

The guy behind the counter checked my ID, took my details, tapped them into the computer, entered another command, and assured me that the phone had now been blacklisted. No calls. No nothing. When I quizzed him further – are you *sure* the phone is truly dead? – he started to eye me the way the girl at the Travelodge had done. Why all the grief? Why all the paranoia? This is a missing phone, sir, not a matter of life or death.

For a split second I was tempted to put him right but then I shot him a grin and wry shrug and sorted myself a twenty five pound pay-as-you-go. Buying a hundred quid's worth of credit raised another eyebrow but by now I was past caring. Thanks to Vodafone, fingers crossed, I've probably avoided a death at someone else's hands. Now, still surfing a modest wave of relief at the café table, I have a number of calls to make. And the first of them, I suspect, will go to Sapir.

Three

Sapir is where this story of mine begins and ends. I want you to picture a city called Jenin up at the very top of the West Bank, a five-minute drive from the Israeli border. It's as noisy and chaotic as every other city on the West Bank but today they call this place "suicide central" because the refugee camps here produced a reliable string of young men prepared to don the vest of immortality, shoot their farewell video, and take the struggle to the enemy.

With fellow martyrs from elsewhere in the West Bank, they turned cities like Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem into front line abattoirs in a war that never seemed to end. Over the three years of the Second Intifada, the shadow of the suicide bomber wove itself into the Israeli streetscape. Cafes emptied. Shopping malls became no-go zones. If you were wise, you sent your kids to school on separate buses. By Christmas 2003, these young Palestinians – brave or otherwise - had ghosted into Israel and killed more than a hundred Jews.

I got to Jenin three years later. I'd been working in the Gaza Strip, loosely attached to a Scandinavian NGO, gathering material for a lengthy piece about life after Ariel Sharon's surprise pull-out. The sheer chaos of the place – over a million people banded up in a tiny sliver of coast – felt instantly like home, not least because it seemed to mirror the wreckage of my private life.

Back in London, I'd betrayed the woman I loved by embarking on a meaningless affair I never even bothered to lie about. I returned one night to the caravan where we lived to find a terse three-line note, and my wife and daughter gone. There was no forwarding address and when I tried Roz' phone it had been disconnected.

The caravan sat on a scruffy site in Colnbrook directly under the flight path into Heathrow. We lived there because it was cheap, and for more than a year we'd made a home together, but once my little family had sensibly fled it became a cell. For long nights I lay in bed, braced for the next landing, anticipating the moment the

pilot eased the throttles back for touchdown, knowing my own life had crashed and burned. The fact that I couldn't explain myself to myself, the realisation that I seemed to have become someone else, simply added to my bewilderment and a growing sense of self-disgust.

Gaza changed some of that. Talk to anyone who has done serious time there, served a sentence if you like, and they'll tell you about the people, the kids especially. Gaza is a place where work is scarce, where clean water is often hard to find, where prospects for the kind of life most of us take for granted are non-existent, but where the family has survived.

The women, especially, hold everything together. In the midst of public squalor – crap everywhere, mountains of rubbish in the street - the family home is often spotless. Having children, lots of them, is the only reliable form of security but every new mouth to feed sets a new challenge. But here's the thing. These people are poor, dirt poor, yet their generosity is boundless. Never tell a Palestinian you like something he's got. Why? Because he'll give it to you.

I loved the place. It had the familiarity – the comfort – of an old pullover. After the wounds I'd inflicted on Roz and Carragh, Gaza seemed to offer the possibility of some kind of redemption. Then came the morning when the text arrived from London. My feature piece on life after the Israeli pull-out had found a taker in the shape of a new magazine, headquartered in Shoreditch. *Solstice* pitched itself as the still point in an ever-turning world and the tiny editorial staff had a tie-in I never fully understood with the *Guardian*. Whatever that link might have been, they seemed to like what I'd sent them. The money they offered was pitiful but that wasn't the point. After a stop-start career with a number of media outlets, I'd stumbled on a market for something I really wanted to write.

The piece was published a couple of months later. Within a week I was talking to an editor in a major publishing house about the possibility of a fly-on-the-wall book about the jittery pulse of life in Gaza, about getting by, about dignity and respect in the face of impossible odds. I blew what little money I'd managed to save on a flight back on London. I happened to have a window seat and as the plane sank over Colnbrook I peered down, curious to know whether I could spot the caravan site where Roz and I had made a life. It must have been on the other side of the

aircraft because all I could see was a reservoir but that, in a way, seemed oddly fitting. I wanted to drown my recent past under millions of gallons of water. And then I wanted to surface and thrash around a bit and make a brand-new start.

The meeting with the publisher went nowhere. Within minutes I knew we were on separate planets. The editor was young, pretty, ambitious. Nothing wrong with any of that but her take on the Middle East began and ended with suicide bombers. This, of course, turned out to be a huge irony but at the time I was deeply into nuance. Gaza, I tried to explain, was a complex tissue of loyalties, of betrayals, of the constant possibility of loss. This was drama, but drama in the minor key. My peerless prose, I ventured to suggest, could nail some of that busy madness but by now her eyes had begun to glaze. We never made it to the half-promised lunch.

Better news, though, from *Solstice*. I called round the same afternoon and it was clear at once that they'd really been taken by my feature piece. Reaction from people who seemed to matter was uniformly good. Even the guys at the *Guardian* had been impressed. By now, it was nearly Christmas. In barely a month, Palestinians in Gaza were going to the polls. Word on the Arab street suggested that Hamas, the bad boys on the block, were in with a fighting chance. So maybe I should go back there and monitor events.

And so I did. Hamas won that election, much to the alarm of the Israelis and their backers in the West. The voting was carefully monitored but the US and the EU promptly disowned the winners as a terrorist organisation committed to driving the Israelis into the sea, and refused to have anything more to do with them. This didn't seem to upset the Hamas guys in the slightest, indeed they'd predicted something of the kind, and my published take on life in the world's newest democracy raised a small cheer amongst my modest but growing readership.

Naturally, I'd spent a lot of time getting alongside the Hamas electoral machine and I'd become fascinated by this very Gazan mix of effective street politicians pledged to make life better but still determined to keep taking the war to the Israelis. Which ever way you cut it, it was hard not to admire these people.

Their main man, Khalid Mishal, had recently been thrown out of Jordan and was now living under heavy security in the suburbs of Damascus. I took it for granted that my logical next step was to somehow get alongside him. The West had

been busy painting Mishal as the terrorist mastermind, the embodiment of evil, the certain promise of a second Holocaust, but a lot of what I was seeing on the ground suggested otherwise. Mishal, I told my new masters in London, was canny. He was highly educated. He was a devout Muslim. And on the chessboard of the Middle East, he was making some smart moves. If I could somehow blag an in-depth interview, we might have the makings of a scoop.

There was no immediate reaction from London, but I consulted my contacts book and began to ask around. I wanted an introduction to the man. I wanted support from the right quarters to get myself out of Gaza, across to Egypt, and thence to Damascus. If *Solstice* wouldn't say yes, then maybe I could force their hand.

For weeks, to my disappointment, nothing happened. Then, one evening, there came a knock at my hotel door. I was lounging in a chair on what passed for the balcony, enjoying the last of the flaring sunset on the golden sea. I padded across the tiny room and opened the door. It was a guy who said he was from one of the Hamas offices in Rafah. He brought word of a woman I should meet in the West Bank. She was currently in Jenin and she had a direct line to Mishal. I found some paper and a pen. For some reason the guy was grinning.

"Her name's Sapir," he said. "Sapir Dahan."

Dahan is an Israeli name. As is Sapir. Next morning, intrigued, I negotiated my way through the Erez departure terminal, and took a bus to Jerusalem. That night, thanks to a shared taxi on the West Bank, I found myself in downtown Jenin. My contact in Gaza had given me a cell phone number for Sapir. When she finally answered, I could hear kids yelling in the background, then adult voices, insistent, deeper, but sharing the same excitement.

"Where can I find you?"

She named a square. She said it was close to a market where the buses parked up at night. Behind the square, I'd find another area of levelled ground where the Israeli bulldozers had recently been at work. She had a low voice, almost male, with an Israeli accent. I asked her what was going on.

"Come", she said. "We're playing football."

Palestinians are football mad. Anything from five-a-side to whole streets getting stuck in. It was cold in Jenin, still winter, and by the time I found Sapir, a power cut had plunged the city into darkness.

The game went on regardless, the shuffle of soft shoes as ghostly figures came and went. Sapir was playing in goal, the only woman on the pitch. She was smaller and slighter than the voice on the phone had suggested, and she was trying to tease a little life out of a roll-up. In the flare of yet another match, I saw her face. I like to think that moment, that single glimpse, the whiteness of her skin, the cap of jet-black hair, the fullness of her mouth, the way her eyes playfully assessed my presence, changed everything. Sapir, that night, opened a door I never knew existed. At her invitation, I stepped through the door and what lay beyond has shaped the rest of my life.

Four

The Edgware Road is revving up for lunchtime. I have Sapir's number. She's forbidden me to phone.

"Who is this?" she says.

"It's me." A tiny pause.

"Where are you?"

"London."

"Why?"

"You know why."

A longish pause. A radio in the background. Then she's gone. I stare at my new phone for a long moment. I've phoned her three times over the last month or so, in defiance of her insistence on being left alone, but this is the first time she's hung up on me. So much for the fond farewell, for the shortish list of thoughts I've saved up as a kind of bequest. So much for the years we've been together, for the closeness I know we had, for the intimacies we shared, for that oasis of a future that shimmered before us.

I once told her I'd be nothing without her. When she turned away, laughing, I said it was true. I'd prefer to be dead, I said, than live with the knowledge that she belonged to someone else.

I close my eyes. One word, I think. Why not?

The table shudders. I hear the scrape of a chair.

"Do you mind?" Foreign accent. Female.

I'm looking at a Filipino carer standing beside a figure slumped in a wheelchair. This guy could be any age between late adolescence and – say – thirty. He's wearing baggy jeans at least a size too large and a white T-shirt under a thick fleece. His head lolls on one shoulder and a thin trickle of saliva leaks from the corner of his mouth. Judging by his skin tone, and the depth of his brown eyes, he's probably Arab.

The carer asks again about the spare places at my table. I look around. The terrace has filled up. Every other table is taken.

“My pleasure,” I gesture gracelessly at the chair she’s already in the process of removing. The truth is I resent this sudden interruption but real life, yet again, has sprung a trap.

The wheelchair is state-of-the-art. With tiny inch-perfect adjustments to the control toggle, the guy docks with the table. His carer needs to use the lavatory.

She glances towards the interior of the café. The Arab jerks his head up and barks something at her. I haven’t a clue what he’s saying but she produces a pair of Oakleys and slips them onto his nose. His eyes invisible, he becomes a figure from a horror movie, deeply unsettling.

The carer departs. I have nothing to read, nowhere to hide. £25, alas, doesn’t buy you the diversions of a smartphone.

The Arab is trying to bend forward, a series of grunts this time. Then he makes a strange backwards gesture, one claw-like hand disappearing behind his back. I get to my feet. He has a pad to support him, the softest tan leather that cushions his back. The pad has slipped. I readjust it, feeling that same hand descend softly on mine. A single touch. Thank you.

“My pleasure,” I say again. *“Afwan”*

He peers up at me. I’m not sure whether it’s a frown or a smile but my Arabic accent can’t be that bad because he understands the courtesy. He gets some words out, forcing them through his tiny rosebud mouth, wanting a conversation, assuming I’m fluent. That’s far from the truth. I may have picked up the basics in my years with Sapir but there’s no way I’m going to risk a conversation, especially in the light of The Word.

Through no fault of his own, this guy mangles everything. An unlucky collision of those harsh Levantine syllables and we’d both be history. The odds may be infinitesimal, but I’m not prepared to take the chance, not while Sapir remains unfinished business, not while enough of the day remains for me to ponder exactly where things went so catastrophically wrong between us. Given what I’ve pledged to do, want to do, need to do, the least Mansour owes me is the freedom of my final hours. That, at least, I’ve earned.

The Arab is beckoning me closer, talking all the time while I back away. Heads have turned at neighbouring tables. Women, especially, are getting the wrong idea. They think I can't handle this talkative cripple. They think I'm embarrassed. Not true. What I can't handle is the thought of dying earlier than I should, dissolved into tiny pieces by a linguistic accident.

The guy is bright, brighter than I'd thought. His hands are extended in front of him, a gesture of disappointment. What's wrong with me, he seems to be saying. Why won't you stay?

I hesitate a moment, shamed, then force a smile as the carer appears from the café.

"Enjoy", I say, gesturing at my abandoned table.

My new friend in the wheelchair turns out to speak English.

"You, too." His head is back on his shoulder. "*Inshallah.*"

Five

I never got anywhere with the Mishal interview. That first night in Jenin, Sapir took me back to the three room rental she shared with a French male nurse. We talked by candlelight. She wanted to know about the elections in Gaza, about how Hamas were handling the fruits of democracy, about me. I'd brought a couple of bottles of wine as I passed through Jerusalem and I probably told her more than she needed to know. I gave her a clue or two about the wreckage of my private life. I said I was a journalist by trade, but a writer by preference. She understood the distinction at once and she loved it. Her English was perfect.

"Writers never make money", she told me, "but writers are better company. If you want material...", she gestured at the noisy darkness beyond the window, "...help yourself."

I did. For the next couple of days, in the care of a Palestinian friend of Sapir's, I prowled the back alleys of Jenin while she made enquiries about fixing something up with Khalid Misal. The Palestinian guy was called Daleel. He'd been on the edges of the football game the night I'd arrived from Jerusalem and although he wasn't prepared to go into any kind of detail I got the impression that he, too, was with Hamas.

Sapir, he said, had been in town – off and on – for a couple of years. There were plenty of left-wing Israelis who spent time on the West Bank. These had become the ex-patriate conscience of the Occupation, earnest young students and activists who bore witness to what was happening in the name of their mother country, but no one had attracted more attention and turned more heads than Sapir. When I asked why, Daleel just smiled. Then he told me to take her to a particular checkpoint near the refugee camp. A new bunch of Israeli recruits had recently arrived. They were over-aggressive because they were frightened. Sapir, he implied, had a special way of handling them.

He was right. The following afternoon, we turned up at the checkpoint. By now, I knew that Sapir had limited time for the NGO world of non-violence workshops, camera-toting peace stewards, and informed outrage voiced on dozens of social media sites. She evidently favoured more direct forms of engagement.

The checkpoint had been there for a while, artfully constructed lines of sandbags funnelling lines of patient Palestinian men and women towards wary young Israeli soldiers who inspected their documentation. The line shuffled forward then came to a halt for no obvious reason. These pauses lasted minutes, sometimes longer. The soldiers took time off to smoke, or study their phones, or simply chat to each other. This was an indifference close to contempt. I'd seen it at the Erez crossing in Gaza and although Palestinians had been taught to expect nothing less, it still angered me.

Sapir, who was doubtless hardened to scenes like this, bided her time. Then a particular woman – old, weighed down with bags of shopping plus a live chicken – found herself on the end of an Israeli tongue-lashing from a soldier young enough to be her grandson. Sapir listened for a while, edging closer. Then she stepped forward, inserting herself between the soldier and the old woman, and unleashed a torrent of Hebrew. I didn't understand a word but the soldier looked first astonished, then angry, and the waiting Palestinians loved it.

The scene, by now, had attracted the attention of the officer in charge, an older man. He emerged from behind the sandbags and gestured to the driver of a nearby jeep. The driver got out and opened the rear door while the officer handcuffed Sapir and pushed her towards the jeep. She went in the back without a struggle, but turned to give her captor a last volley before he slammed the door shut. Then he stepped back into the road and waved us all away.

This little piece of theatre was impressive enough but what stayed in my memory was something else. The officer was looking at Sapir as the jeep bumped away and the expression on his face told me everything I needed to know. With her fearlessness, and her good looks, and her gamine fury, she turned him on. Just like she did me.

She was back that same evening, released by the military after a four-hour interrogation. When I asked her what she'd said at the checkpoint she just

shrugged. I told them they were no better than the Serbs in Bosnia, she said. Or the Nazis in Poland. Or the Turks in Armenia. Whatever the politicians back home told them, they were giving ethnic cleansing a bad name. These kids are educated, rich beyond any Palestinian's imagination. They have no right to be here but since national service gives them little choice maybe they could start behaving like human beings.

"You said all that?"

"Yes."

"*Ethnic cleansing?*"

"Sure", she shrugged, "Why not?"

This was a new twist, recent history reduced to the rawest of truths. That evening, we talked long into the night. She told me about her childhood in Haifa. Her parents had come to Israel from the US in the early sixties. Her dad was Jewish, her mother Roman Catholic. The youngest of three children, she'd done OK at school – especially in languages – but had left at seventeen to move in with a conceptual artist called Elon she'd met at a party. This had outraged her mother, though her dad – in her phrase – had at first been pretty cool about it.

Elon was nearly three times her age, a bear of a man with shoulder-length hair, huge appetites and a national reputation. At the time, Sapir knew that she was only the latest of a small army of lovers but regarded him as a challenge. She thought she could tie him down and she was wrong. This realisation co-incided with her summons to national service and she departed for basic training in the IDF with a broken heart but scarcely a backward glance. I was a child, she said. My mother was right but there was no way I'd ever admit it.

The army, she said, opened her eyes to what was happening on the West Bank. In her second year in uniform her unit helped clear the caves on a mountain side above a village near Hebron. These Palestinian families had lived in the caves since forever, tending their livestock and raising their kids. In half a day Sapir and her buddies chased four generations into the daylight, and then pushed them down the hill. Suddenly homeless, they carried what they could while the Israelis started on the sheep and chickens.

For the next few weeks, she said, the people of the caves relied on local villagers for shelter and support but by the time Sapir went back to check, quarrels were breaking out about the pastureland. There wasn't enough grazing in the parched fields to feed the extra livestock and in the depths of winter the families from the mountain – hundreds and hundreds of people – simply drifted away.

That's when I started getting angry, she said. I've wanted to change things all my life. I thought I could change Elon. It didn't work out. Here was something else, something more important. We were in the wrong. We trampled over everything, over everyone. We were like the fattest kids at the party. Grab, grab, grab. It was gross.

The following year – 2000 – Ariel Sharon, a buccaneer general turned politician, swaggered into the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, outraging Palestinians across the West Bank and lighting a bonfire of protests that became the Second Intifada. Her Army service completed, Sapir watched the revolt spiral out of control.

Within a year, Sharon was Prime Minister. A wave of suicide bombings in Israel's major cities triggered a savage crackdown across the West Bank. Mass arrests. Houses levelled. Kids shot in street protests. And then the beginnings of an eight-metre wall designed to keep the suicide bombers out of the motherland. Watching TV footage of Army tanks and bulldozers moving into Jenin did it for Sapir. The city had become a nursery for young suicide bombers and the Israeli high command had decided to clean it out. Next morning, Sapir cashed her savings and – with her dad's blessing - made her way onto the West Bank.

Sapir's dad, Daniel, is now 72. He still in good nick, still his own man, still angry as his country drifts ever more rightwards. The last time I met him was back in August, just weeks before Sapir gave me the push. He was in Jerusalem and he wanted to take me to Yad Vashem. This is a museum on the bony hills outside the city, at the very end of the tramline, and it walks you through the story of the Holocaust.

Gallery by gallery, the story gets grimmer and grimmer and by the end of the tour you realise three things: that the Jews have a truly apocalyptic tale to tell; that they narrate it with flair, and dignity, and incredible attention to detail; and that the end of the journey – a heart-stopping view over the bare Judean hills – is all the

proof you'd ever need that the Jews are here to stay. This is my land. I have what I hold. Whatever the consequences.

I put this point to Danny that same afternoon. Just how many millions of your forebears do you have to lose before you turn your back on the world, arm yourself to the teeth, and get into the serious business of collective punishment?

To my surprise, Danny wasn't having it. As a young paratrooper in the Six Day War, he'd watched friends die in the battle for Jerusalem. Nearly fifty years later, a permanent settlement was as far away as ever. "We poison ourselves with our violence", he growled. "We break the bones of the Palestinians and we think that's the road to peace. You know what? We never fucking learn."

Years earlier, that night in Jenin when she emerged from the hands of the military, Sapir had said something very similar. Her kith and kin were trying to drive every last Arab out of Palestine. That's the game plan, she kept telling me. That's where it begins and ends. Eretz Israel. Sole possession. The whole of Palestine. For ever.

Later that evening, I asked her whether she'd managed to nail down the interview with Mishal. She shook her head and then took my hand, a gesture I interpreted as guilt.

"I haven't", she said.

"Will it ever happen?"

"I doubt it. Does that matter?"

I studied her for a moment. I'd known this woman for all of three days.

"Probably not", I said.

Six

Sapir and I didn't become lovers for nearly a year. Tugged along in her boiling wake, I found myself a part-time job with a Danish NGO pledged to monitor the outer reaches of Israeli barbarity in the so-called administration of the OT (Occupied Territories). The job came with basic accomodation – a single room over a laundrette in the busier end of Nablus – and enough money to keep myself alive. The guy who hired me, a philosophy lecturer from Copenhagen University on a year's leave of absence, fed me contact after contact in the local community and lent me the services of a young Palestinian translator. In essence, this job was little different to what I was used to doing as a journalist. You met lots of people. You won their confidence. You teased out their stories. You sought corroboration. And then you looked hard to see what – collectively – they told you.

A lot of NGOs speak the dry language of assimilated data and pie charts. It was my good fortune that Kornelius favoured the warmer medium of words on paper plus – wherever possible – video and audio recordings. Acquiring the latter was often tricky. Shin Bet, the Israeli Internal Security Service, had offices on the West Bank and ran an extensive network of paid informers. Intelligence from these sources fed into the constant raids mounted by Israeli snatch squads against targets of interest.

Men you'd see on the street one day would simply disappear the next to become one of the thousands of Palestinians held indefinitely without trial. By going on tape, my would-be interviewees – activists operating in the shadows of the political marketplace - would simply offer themselves to the Israelis on a plate. Hence my new boss's faith in – God bless him – the written word.

"Bring these people to life," he told me the day I got the job. "They can stay anonymous but I want to smell them. I want to touch them. Above all I want to *believe* in them."

It was good work, work I enjoyed, and it taught me a great deal about just how resilient the Palestinians had become. After a particularly hectic week back in Jenin, I began to believe in a specific Palestinian gene, developed in pre-biblical times and then passed on from generation to generation. An old guy who had a shop near where I lived once told me that there wouldn't be a serious problem with the Israelis. We've seen off the Romans, he said. We got rid of the Normans, the Crusaders, and the Ottoman Turks. We even waved goodbye to the Brits after the Second World War. So, what makes you think the Jews are here to stay?

It was a good line and it raised a smile from Kornelius when I hand-delivered one of my regular reports (e-mail was another open gift to the Israelis). My boss, by now, was barely a month away from returning to Denmark for the start of the new academic year but he assured me that my job would be safe with whoever took his place. He even gave me a decent raise which I promptly invested in a box of Palestinian red wine.

By now I realised the kind of roots Sapir was sinking amongst the local population. One afternoon, she took me to meet a family she knew in Ramallah where I counted no less than 11 kids in and around the house.

The father, the only guy bringing in a wage, had been disappeared by the Israelis after a street arrest several years ago but somehow the women kept it all together. Looking for a quote for Kornelius, I talked through Sapir to the grandma. She turned out to be a refugee from the 1948 civil war, driven out of the Mandate by armed Jewish gangs before Israel declared itself a nation.

At 14, she said she'd walked across the mountains of the West Bank with her kid brother on her back before her father sought help from the Jordanians and found a patch of land that became the family's new home. When I asked her about the current troubles, and her ever-shrinking homeland, she waited for the translation, and then beamed at me before gesturing round at the sea of young faces.

"This is the Palestinian secret weapon," she said. "And the Israelis have no answer."

Encounters like these made a huge impression at a stage when I was fighting to understand what was really going on. Sapir was more than happy to toss me more evidence of what her kith and kin were up to on the West Bank but there also

came moments, deeply welcome, when she let me have a glimpse or two of her private life. Which is how I first got to hear about Hazeem.

Hazeem Sharabi was a prominent Palestinian businessman with a villa in the hills above Ramallah. He'd made his money in construction and had diversified into property development. I'd already heard rumours that his break-through moment had arrived in 2002 when the Oslo Peace process had released a flood of money and it seemed that Hazeem had surfed this golden wave to some effect. He was now the poster boy for an emerging entrepreneurial Palestine that might one day be free from refugee camps and checkpoint queues, and Sapir thought it would be a good idea for me to meet him.

She made a call and got us an invite to a smart hotel in Ramallah. Hazeem was a big man, bulky, with huge shoulders, a pumping handshake, and lots of presence. He wore an exquisite suit that must have been hand-tailored to conceal a sizeable belly, and his English – lightly accented – was near-perfect. This was a guy who could slip into corporate boardrooms in any western capital and scarcely raise an eyebrow. Maybe presence is the wrong word. Maybe *chutzpah* would be closer. He radiated the kind of authority and self-belief that only serious money can impart. Sapir had described him as the rogue elephant in the jungle of the West Bank and – as it turned out – she was right.

That evening, he dominated the conversation from the moment we met, shepherding myself and Sapir to our reserved table and summoning an army of waiters with no more than a lift of his chin. After a murmured consultation over the wine list a bottle of Mouton Cadet arrived, which was evidently Sapir's favourite. In the meantime, as happens so often with alpha males, Hazeem was telling me his story, staking out his turf, putting down markers in case I'd been listening to the wrong people and drawn inappropriate conclusions.

He told me he'd been a West Banker all his life. He'd grown up as poor and cherished as any other Palestinian kid. At nine, he was tilling the fields and helping his dad haul enough rocks to build a modest extension to their three-room house. Of all his brothers, he was the biggest and the fittest and the strongest and at school he'd developed a passion for martial arts. He'd never been one of the hot-heads who had gone into politics – he had neither the wit nor the patience to follow the

endless arguments – but he knew already that in a rough old neighbourhood it paid to look after yourself.

And so he found a gym in Ramallah and trained and trained until he caught the eye of a promoter. By now he had a black belt in karate and a growing reputation that extended across the West Bank. The promoter wanted to turn him into a boxer but Hazeem, as ever, knew better. Wrestling, he decided, would be his game.

By the age of 21, he said he was drawing sizeable crowds in venues across the West Bank. He even fought in Amman and Tel Aviv. The Israelis, he said, had loved him. One night in Netanya he'd taken on a Russian with a reputation for extreme violence and zero respect for the rules. The match had quickly descended into a brawl and after an illegal knee in the groin, Hazeem had knocked the Russian out. He must have told this story a million times and he coloured it with a blur of hand-movements. As he administered the coup-de-grace to his opponent, I was watching Sapir and I think this was the moment I realised they were lovers.

They were sitting side by side and the expression on her face spoke of something close to adoration. She was bewitched by him. He was the biggest of beasts and when the story came to an end her hand settled on his and she squeezed it, a gesture of congratulation. There was a gleam of sweat on Hazeem's forehead and as he dabbed at it with his napkin, I caught Sapir's eye. She was radiant. Her man had conquered all. Yet again.

Days later, back in Nablus, she admitted that she and Hazeem had become close. She never used the word mistress because she was never interested in any kind of label but she happily accepted that they met on a regular basis, a relationship conducted in discreet suites in the best West Bank hotels, and the occasional weekend in Dubai.

This made no sense to me. Word on the street suggested that Hazeem had colluded with the Israelis. His cement had helped build Ariel Sharon's hated wall. He was a man for whom business came before everything else. So how come Sapir was fucking him?

The question, back in Nablus a couple of days later, sparked a smile.

"Because I can." She said.

Seven

By now I'd been with Sapir for nearly a year. We talked incessantly but so far, we'd yet to take the relationship any further. She'd become a kind of mentor, teaching me about the thousand and one splinter groups that collectively tried to make life hard for the Israelis, and for this I was deeply grateful.

Hamas, to the world's astonishment, was making democracy work in Gaza but on the West Bank the Israelis were losing patience with the jihadist fighters from Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs brigade. Like Hamas, with whom they were often at odds, these were the guys who were refusing to accept the Israeli occupation, plotting ambushes, killing settlers, targetting soldiers at checkpoints, and despatching teenage suicide bombers to Tel Aviv. The Israelis, wedded to overkill, bided their time.

Christmas in Nablus came and went. My new boss in the Danish NGO, a woman called Pedar, was even more supportive than Kornelius and encouraged me to use some of the material I was gathering on her behalf to build a longer account that might make a feature article or even a book. This, of course, was what had taken me to the Middle East in the first place and I was more than happy to do her bidding.

By now, with a growing list of contacts in the city, I was aware that tensions were rising. Israel intelligence appeared to believe that al-Aqsa cells were operating out of Nablus and they were right. Then came the Sunday morning in March when the city exploded.

Sapir and I and a couple of NGO mates had been out on the Saturday night. We'd finished up at Sapir's place and began to play cards. Shortly after midnight, maybe one in the morning, there were noises in the street, engines revving, men running, women screaming. Then came a male voice, harsh, metallic, shouting through a loudhailer.

Sapir was first to the window. There were IDF jeeps in the street below, then heavier vehicles, troops in full combat gear. The guy with the loudhailer was in one of the jeeps. Sapir said his Arabic was crap, mangled by his Hebrew accent, but the message was clear enough. Everyone was to stay at home and await orders. The curfew would last until further notice. Any resistance would be severely dealt with. This, in short, was an invasion.

I'd never been invaded before and it was a strange feeling. Was this what had happened when the Nazis rolled into the Sudetenland and Poland? Did you put down your winning hand of cards, lock your door, empty the bottle, turn on the radio and try and find out what the fuck was going on? The sheer speed of the clamp-down was scary. The Israelis had taken over everything, even the small hours of Sunday morning on Radio Nablus. We were to sit tight and obey orders. End of.

We discussed what to do. Dawn broke around seven. We ventured onto the street, clutching our NGO credentials, and made our way into the very centre of town. There were Israeli soldiers everywhere, armed to the teeth. Squads of them moved from house to house under the supervision of an officer who appeared to be hunting specific addresses. Denied entry, they'd simply kick the door down and toss in sound bombs to announce their presence. Even from twenty metres away, these babies make a serious noise and at close quarters in a confined space they must be terrifying. Either way, it worked because within minutes, from house after house, men emerged into the cold grey light, unshaven, confused, their hands tied behind them, while IDF dogs snapped and snarled at their heels. Sapir, for once, simply watched.

Later that morning, with the Old City in lock-down, we joined forces with other NGOs to try and get food and medicine to families trapped in their homes. The Israelis were merciless with the locals, ignoring their pleas for help, and they did their best to make life tough for us, but our passports and NGO status bought us a measure of immunity which we exploited to the full.

In the afternoon, we found ourselves at the Al-Naaja university. Israeli soldiers had arrived at four in the morning and cleared the building with more sound bombs before they searched the place. Six hours later, students returned to find their rooms wrecked. That afternoon, they showed us the damage: shattered

windows, light fixtures dangling from their sockets, textbooks and assignments littering the floor, posters ripped from the walls. The point they were making was all too obvious. Forget about your education. We are the masters now.

No one had died at the university but there was something in this casual savagery that told me a great deal about the Israelis. They wanted to hurt people. Sometimes it took a bullet, or a beating. Other times, like now, it was enough to demonstrate their contempt for Arab culture and Arab dreams. Downtown, their engineers were tearing apart centuries-old buildings. Heavy military vehicles broke water pipes beneath the cobbled streets, spilling days of precious supply. Soldiers even trashed the city's Turkish baths. The building dated back four hundred years. It featured in every tourist guide. Another fragment of Palestinian heritage. Gone.

A day or so later, the Israelis pulled out. That night, I was alone with Sapir.

"I'm glad you saw what they can do," she said.

"They?"

"We. You're right. Once a Jew..."

I shrugged, said nothing. She was looking at a pile of notes I'd just finished scribbling, a pulling-together of everything I'd seen and heard over the last forty eight hours.

"What are you going to do with all that?"

I told her I'd type them up, show them to Pedar.

"What else?"

"I don't know. Maybe a feature piece. Maybe the start of a book." I shrugged. "Whatever."

"You really care, don't you?"

"About this? About what's going on?" I nodded. "Yes, I do."

She got up from the sofa and joined me at the table. It was cold at night and she was wearing a sweater over her T-shirt. The sweater smelled of the joss sticks she burned to mask the smell of the drains. She glanced briefly at the notes then took my hand. I had the overwhelming impression that I'd passed some kind of test.

"I'd like to fuck you", she said. "Is that OK?"

It was. And here's a confession. Over the months that followed, Sapir became my keeper. Encouraging me. Reading my stuff. Making suggestions. Telling me when one sentence worked and when another didn't. Christ, she even seemed *proud* of me.

I blossomed, of course. We still lived apart, carefully preserving our independence, but this was very definitely a new chapter in my life. Not only had we closed the gap between us, but this glorious woman seemed to have figured out what made me tick. Not simply my appetite for good causes, for doing something half-meaningful with my life, but my secret belief that somehow I could turn all this stuff – all these impressions, friendships, experiences, anger – into words on paper. Was this my Hemingway moment? Maybe it was. Should I have seen what lay down the line? No way.

At Sapir's insistence, I worked on the story of the Nablus invasion for several weeks, writing in the late evenings after peace had settled on the streets outside. I wrote in longhand by candlelight because I got tired of the endless power cuts losing me whole chunks of precious draft on my borrowed PC and to my quiet delight it seemed to work.

A couple of nights a week Sapir would come over around midnight with spare candles and when she could afford it, a bottle of wine. I'd try bits out on her, rearrange stuff, agree that it needed more pace, more colour, and then we'd empty the bottle and lie side by side in the narrow bed, listening to the night.

Sometimes, in the small hours, we'd hear gunfire, a collection of single shots, three, maybe four, and I'd feel Sapir shivering in my arms. They were executions, she said. Palestinians forced into collaboration by the Israelis and then betrayed to Al-Fatah or Hamas. I pressed her for more details, but she shook her head and turned her face to the wall. Then, a night or so later, it would happen again. Justice on the West Bank, as I was fast finding out, was summary and violent. No appeal. No clemency. Just a bullet in the head and a couple more to make sure.

A month's work knocked the piece into shape. I gave it a final polish and then e-mailed it to *Solstice* in London. The editor who'd commissioned my previous despatches liked it a lot but wanted a more personal feel. I think I knew what she

was getting at, but I'd never conceived the thing as any kind of blog. Sapir begged to differ. She thought the editor was right. Off the leash, half a bottle down, she told me I talked and wrote like an angel. Loosen up, she said. These guys want to be feeling what we're feeling. Let them share your anger, your rage. I nodded. I told her she was right. And I especially liked the "we".

The piece was published in the magazine's bumper summer edition. I don't know what it did for anyone lounging on a beach but I started getting e-mails forwarded by my editor. Some of them, predictably, were from Zionist nutters who told me to get back in my Arab cave. They didn't believe a word I'd written, claimed the whole thing was a fabrication, and predicted dire personal consequences. On reflection, I realise they were right but at the time I was more interested in the readers I'd shocked into taking a stand. The Israelis, wrote one lecturer from Swansea, needed sorting out before they blew up the whole fucking world. While a woman from Skegness sent me a cheque for £10, which I was to spend on the neediest Palestinian child I knew.

It was at this point, late summer 2007, that the magazine suddenly remembered my bid to interview Khalid Mishal. They'd obviously been tuning into the latest vibes coming out of the Middle East and realised that Hamas wasn't about to let Israel and her Western buddies stand between Gaza and democracy. A couple of emails arrived, followed by a phone call. An exclusive interview with Mishal would be very welcome indeed. The Nablus invasion piece was still attracting attention. If I wanted to make my name, here was the way to do it.

I shared the news with Sapir. To the best of my knowledge, Mishal and his lieutenants were still holed up in Damascus. Back in 1997, the Israelis had bungled an attempt to kill him on the street in Amman, a very black day in the history of the Mossad assassination squads, and I'd been told they were eager to have another go. Security around the Hamas complex in Damascus was therefore very tight. Might Sapir smooth the path to the interview of my dreams?

To my surprise, she said no. Hamas trusted no one, least of all an Israeli.

"Is that why you couldn't get the interview before?"

"Yes."

"Did you try?"

“No. There was no point.”

“So what do I do?”

“Ask elsewhere,” she nodded at the pile of handwritten notes that had become my Nablus article. “You’re getting a reputation here. People trust you. Go to Hamas. See what happens.”

And so, I did. A watchful, impressively quiet guy at the main Hamas office in Ramallah listened to my pitch. It turned out that he’d read all my pieces in *Solstice*. He didn’t say whether he liked them or not, but he was curious to know what kept me on the West Bank.

“Because it matters to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I think what the Israelis are doing here is wrong.”

“How?”

“Because it’s your land, not theirs. And they’re driving you out.”

“So, what’s the answer?”

I shook my head, said I didn’t know. I hadn’t come here for a head-to-head on the politics of this benighted place. Neither did I believe that I had anything to prove. In the shape of the stuff published in *Solstice*, I was happy to let my work speak for itself.

Our exchange had come to an end. No cups of sweet tea. No Turkish coffee. Not even a handshake. My new friend’s eyes strayed to the open door, an invitation to be on my way. I’d already given him my contact details.

“I’ll be in touch”, he said. “Maybe a week. Maybe longer.”

The answer came back the following day. With regret, Khalid Mishal would not be making himself available for interview.

Sapir registered no surprise when I told her the news. She said she had to go home for a while to look after her dad who had broken his leg after falling off a horse on holiday on the Golan Heights. He’d divorced her mum years ago, so she wasn’t around and neither of her brothers was minded to help out.

Sapir was away for nearly two months and I missed her badly. We talked nearly every day on the phone, and I sensed she wanted to be back. A couple of

times I suggested I might leave the West Bank and take the bus up to Haifa for a couple of days but both times she said no. In one sense, that was just as well. Pedar, like Kornelius, had returned to her full-time job in Copenhagen and for the time being I was running the agency single-handed. The fact that the Danes trusted me I took as a compliment but doing my own work as well as Pedar's left no time for snatched weekends.

Sapir returned after Christmas. We celebrated with a turkey I'd been saving, and a plum pudding I'd acquired from a mate working for Save the Children. Sapir had found half a bottle of Armagnac from somewhere. We set fire to the pudding with a couple of spoonfuls and drank the rest. Spirits have always done mean things to me. When I enquired about Hazeem she shot me a look and then said he was fine. He'd taken his wife and kids to Dubai for a holiday and eaten far too much for his own good.

"You'd know about that," I said. Statement, not question.

"Of course."

"Because you've just been with him."

"I have," she nodded. "Yesterday afternoon. On the way back through Ramallah."

"Good, was it?"

"Yes."

"Good as ever?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Rule one with Sapir was never admit weakness. Fat chance.

"Because I'm jealous," I said. "Because you matter to me and I thought you might feel the same way."

"What makes you think I don't?"

"Because you're screwing another man."

"And enjoying it?" She was smiling now. "Is that your problem?"

Her answer, so direct, so matter-of-fact, floored me. Did I have any right to dictate what she did with the rest of her private life? Did I have any rights here at all?

I was determined to take this conversation further and Sapir knew it. She pushed the empty glasses to one side and straddled my lap. Her face was very close, her breath hot on my cheek.

“I’m here”, she said. “Isn’t that enough?”

Eight

It's mid-afternoon. I booked at the Ritz a couple of days ago. I asked for a table in the Palm Court. Three people. Quarter to four. Name? Charlie McGuigan. I take the tube, the last time I'll ever push in through the ticket barrier, ride the escalator to the depths of the Piccadilly Line, wait on the crowded platform, eye the giant ads beyond the gleaming rails. Will I miss any of this shit? No. Will my little perch in wherever awaits me be papered with come-ons for the Debenhams Summer Sale, for the latest Kylie Minogue album, for the blessings of rainy-day life insurance? Highly unlikely.

All my life I've been interested in perceptions of hell. Moments on the West Bank and in Gaza came pretty close but on reflection, back in a city I've come to loathe, I'd probably settle for the rising tide of buy-me that so badly wants to engulf us. We are what we wear, what we earn, what we own. The fact that the price of your new kitchen could keep a Nablus family in groceries for a couple of years will kill most conversations stone-dead: what the fuck has a bunch of needy Arabs got to do with me? I glance at the thickening line of punters along the platform, dead-eyed, expressionless, and the thought of what lies ahead brings a smile to my face. Never underestimate the power of the have-nots.

I arrive at the Ritz a couple of minutes early. The Palm Court is already filling up. A French waiter shepherds me to my table. Afternoon tea for three will set me back nearly ninety quid but money ceases to have any meaning when you won't be around to pay off the credit card.

I've asked for a table at the back of the Palm Court. I settle in, make myself comfortable. Decorated pillars soar above me. A chandelier hangs from the ornate ceiling. Aside from a pianist offering a medley of Andrew Lloyd Webber classics, this could be a corner of the Palace of Versailles. The place – even the table settings – oozes money, and with money comes power. None of that did Louis XVI any good and I'm still trying to put a name to the politician schmoozing a woman half his age

at a table in the corner when I become aware of two figures standing uncertainly beside the waiter. One of them is Roz, my ex-wife. The other is my daughter, Carragh. Carragh is seventeen. I haven't seen her, spoken to her, heard from her for more than ten years.

I'm unprepared for the shock of seeing her. She's a couple of inches taller than Roz, maybe 5'7", 5'8", and she's wearing a cool grey dress that stops well above her knees. She has a full figure and legs to die for and as her eyes find mine, she smiles. Unforced. Totally natural. The carbon copy of a photo of my mum that my stepdad used to carry round in his wallet. How come Roz and I could possibly have made someone so lovely, so perfectly formed, so unexpected? What happened to the gawky, beach-crazy six-year-old I filed away on my stolen smartphone? Why did I ever spend an entire decade telling myself she never even existed?

The waiter is bringing them over. I get to my feet. For the first time today, the old man's vest is beginning to itch. Roz offers her hand. She looks ill at ease and slightly irritated, as if she's offended by the setting. There are threads of grey in her hair, and her eyes are pouched in darkness.

"Well?" She nods in Carragh's direction. Maybe she's thinking what I'm thinking. Ten wasted years.

I ignore the question and give Carragh a hug. She responds without a trace of awkwardness. She smells wonderful.

"Amazing place," she says. "Do you come here often?"

"Every afternoon. Without fail."

I'm grinning fit to bust, my eyes back on Roz as we all settle at the table.

"He lies, Ka," she says. "This is a man who writes fiction for a living."

"Cheers, Roz."

"Pleasure." She turns and looks me in the eye. "Can I tell you something? We nearly didn't come. If you want to know why we're here, blame your daughter."

"Is that true?" I'm back with Carragh. Or Ka as Roz calls her.

"Yeah," she says. "Although it wasn't just me. Mark thought we ought to come, too."

"Why?"

"Because you never know when it might happen again."

“You mean if.”

“Exactly,” Carragh is grinning. “We all read *Nakba* and I wanted to put a face to the writing.”

“And?”

“I’m glad I came.”

“Already?”

“Already.”

This gladdens me more than I can say. *Nakba*, in publishing-speak, is my break-through novel, a mash-up of passionate love affair, searing political indictment, and – on my heroine’s part – considerable grace under intense pressure. Asked to supply an author photo, I declined. Hence my lovely daughter’s curiosity.

“Can I ask you something?” Carragh again.

“Anything.”

“How much of that stuff is true?”

“Pretty much everything. Except she left me in the end.”

“She did?” Carragh’s eyes are wide. “So, when did you write it?”

“A couple of months ago. After she’d gone.”

“But why? Why did she go?”

“Good question.”

“You’re telling me she just walked away?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s her real name?”

“Sapir.”

“And have you seen her since?”

“No.”

“No contact at all? After everything that happened?”

“We’ve talked on the phone a bit. Not much.”

“Who made the calls?”

“Me.”

“Every time?”

“Yes.”

I'm impressed by my daughter's directness, a candour softened by an unexpected warmth. One day, I tell myself, she'll make a brilliant reporter.

"This stuff matters to you?" I ask her.

"Of course, it does," Roz this time. "You're her father in case you'd forgotten."

"I hadn't."

"I don't believe you."

"Mum...?" Carragh's hand has settled on her mother's arm. "Remember what you promised?"

Roz nods, lowers her head, bites her lip. She's come here for a ruck, I think. It's doubtless long overdue but Carragh isn't having it.

I take out a pen and a folded sheet of paper. I've already typed a note of the details that matter but I have something to add. I scribble a line at the bottom and give it to Roz. She stares at it a moment. Her eye has gone straight to the end of the note.

"Sorry for everything?" She looks up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What it says."

"Right." She frowns. "And the rest of it?"

"It's my Kindle author account. That's the number on the top line. They send royalty statements every month. I've only had one so far but it's in five figures."

"Why do I need to know that?"

"Because the royalties will be coming to you. All they need is your bank details. You can do it direct on the Kindle site. I've fixed it with them already. My password is on the second line." I reach across and point at it.

The frown has deepened. Her bewilderment is all too obvious.

"But why?" she says. "Why? This is your money, not mine."

"I know. It's something I've wanted to do forever."

"Do what?"

"Prove to you that I could make it as an author. Big time. Properly. Serious money. I know you never believed me but now it's happened and it's all yours. Call it a present. Call it conscience money. Call it what you like. It's yours. Enjoy."

"But what about you?"

“I don’t need the money.”

“You don’t?”

“No.”

“Life’s that sweet?”

“Life’s shit, Roz, if you’re asking but that’s a different conversation.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s sweet of you.”

“I mean it.”

I lean back, trying to hide my confusion. All too quickly I’ve arrived at a place I never wanted to be. Sapir taught me the wisdom of hiding weakness. Since she left, I’ve done my best to be the hardest of bastards. Now this.

I look around. The politician, none too subtly, is pawing his tea date. At an adjacent table, an American businessman I recognise from the columns of the *Economist* is stuffing himself on a giant slice of chocolate gateau. In another corner, three old crones, plainly Jewish, are picking at their glazed pear tartlets. Now, I think. I could do it now. One word and the heart of this hideously bling hotel will be ripped apart. One word and my entire life – Roz, Carragh – will be consigned to oblivion. I think of Sapir again. Always go to the max. No half measures. Just do it. That single word, followed by the kind of absolution only darkness can bring.

“*Monsieur? Mesdames?*”

The waiter is hovering for an order. Carragh has spotted the display of cakes. Surfacing from tomorrow’s headlines, I sense this girl has a serious appetite.

I accompany her to the cake stand because she’s insisting on a proper look. The waiter, who fancies her, is amused. She’s torn between a chocolate torte and a cherry gateau. For quite a lot of money, you can eat yourself to death.

Postponing her own choice, Carragh prepares a plate for Roz, a single slice of a hearty-looking fruit cake.

“Mum’s pissed off at you,” she says quietly. “As you’ve probably gathered.”

“For not being around all these years?”

“For breaking the silence. She thinks it’s unnecessary. The word she used was self-indulgent.” She softens the news with a smile.

“And you?”

“Me?” She gives me a look, meltingly candid, pure Sapir. “I think you’re a wicked, wicked man.”

As she doubtless intended, this news comes across as a compliment. I’m aware that I’m staring at her. In five brief minutes, she’s won my heart. She seems so impossibly grown-up, perceptive way beyond her years. I’m insanely proud of her, and insanely happy that I had a hand in her creation. Once the job is done, I want her to be my sole representative on earth, the one decent thing I’ve managed – somehow – to leave behind. Then comes the realisation that the credit for Carragh belongs to Roz, and probably Mark.

Carragh bends to my ear.

“This won’t be the only time, will it?”

I don’t know what to say. It’s warm in here and the old man’s vest is becoming seriously uncomfortable. For the first time it feels like a burden, rather than a release.

“Will it?” Carragh wants an answer.

I don’t know what to say. I just shake my head. Another lie.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“Good.” She kisses my temple. “I loved the book, by the way. And you know what? All my friends are buying it.”

Nine

Nakba is set in the winter of 2008. *Nakba* is an Arabic word meaning “catastrophe”. The narrator, an English writer of undeclared age, is living on the West Bank. The sheer scale of the land grabs he sees going on around him, something he describes as theft on a biblical scale, has shut the door on a complicated past. He loves these people. He wants to help them in any way he can. And to this end he’s hooked up with a younger activist who happens to have stolen his heart. She also happens to be Israeli. You get the picture.

Books written with any kind of passion often draw heavily from real life and *Nakba*, as the title suggests, is no exception. In November 2008, Sapir and I were still living in Nablus, still seeing a great deal of each other, still resisting the temptation to turn every kind of intimacy into a full-blown love affair. We fucked from time to time but this reluctance to go the whole way was entirely Sapir’s. I’d never known a relationship like it and if the price of staying together was avoiding the “L” word, then so be it. Undeclared love is a hard secret to live with. Especially if you – a writer for God’s sake – can find no other description that fits.

Back in Nablus, the political future was looking bleaker and bleaker, especially for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Hamas, to the Western world’s despair, was making democracy work. The Israelis had sealed off the territory, turning normal life into an extremely tough proposition, but the place still managed to function. It had overcrowded schools, under-supplied hospitals, intermittent power supplies, a dwindling supply of basic foodstuffs, and generally shit water. The little sliver of land beside the sea was a huge prison, with living conditions that no Western regime would ever permit, yet life went on, enlivened by the almost daily despatch of the imported rockets that Hamas managed to smuggle in through a network of deep tunnels that ran into Egypt.

These rockets were the Hamas answer to the Israelis’ ever-tightening chokehold on the territory, the chemical equivalent of chucking rocks in a street demo. The Israelis batted most of these fireworks aside but by the end of 2008

Hamas were still lobbing them into southern Israel and the politicians in Tel Aviv were getting seriously pissed off. This wasn't meant to happen. And neither should the Hamas love affair with democracy be allowed to survive. Something had to be done.

Forewarned by sources in Ramallah and East Jerusalem, Sapir and I made our way to Gaza. We both carried NGO accreditation and we wanted to bear witness to whatever the Israelis had in store. Entry into Gaza is via the Erez terminal on the northern border. Hidden eyes watch your every move. A disembodied voice orders you to stop, to start, to sit down, to get up. Decorated in shades of grey, this is the Israeli anteroom to the Gazan hell.

Except Gaza wasn't hell. I hadn't been back for a couple of years, not since Hamas had won the election, but I still had contacts there. These were the guys with their ears to the ground and they confirmed what we'd already picked up on the West Bank. The IDF were quietly mobilising. Heavy armour – Merkava tanks – was rolling south. Then came the morning when we got word that the Israelis had dropped printed fliers in the Rafah area, near the border with Egypt. These fliers demanded that all the tunnels supplying Gaza be closed within 48 hours. Or else. Hamas didn't bother to reply.

Two days later, Sapir and I happened to be in an area of Gaza city that lies close to the Presidential Palace. I don't remember the howl of the approaching F-16s before our world was split apart by a series of huge explosions. It's hard to do justice to shock waves like these. They envelop you. They batter you. You feel numbed. They also frighten you. Badly.

Explosion followed explosion. A police station was hit. I remember seeing a bunch of kids on the way home after morning classes. They were running through the smoke and dust, their tiny hands clamped over their ears. Then came word of more buildings destroyed, one of them beside a school, before yet another F-16 nailed the Presidential Palace, reducing it to a pile of burning rubble. Up the road, crowds were pulling bodies from the remains of a garage when the last rocket exploded nearby. More dead. More injured.

The raid over, we made our way to the Al-Shifa hospital, wanting to help in whatever way we could. Cars and ambulances were queueing outside with the dead

and injured. These included women and children, civilians with no conceivable responsibility for either tunnels or rockets. I remember one guy emerging from a battered people-carrier with a child in his arms. He was, I guess, the father. The child was unconscious, her eyes closed, her head lolling over the crook of her father's arm. She may have already been dead. I don't know. But behind the father, screaming, came a woman, probably the child's mother. She was waving an object wrapped in a tea towel. It turned out to be the child's arm.

Within hours, the Israelis announced that these first attacks were only a taster. There would be more rockets, more buildings levelled, more bits of the Hamas machine vaporised, more kids killed. The warnings came with the usual assurance that every strike would be "carefully targeted" using "precision weapons" but the chaos of that first day and the grotesque scenes inside the hospital had already told me that the Israelis were either liars or fantasists. Whatever their intentions, neither their target intelligence nor their fabled hi-tech weaponry had been remotely precise enough to spare that child's arm.

By midnight, in common with most of Gaza, Sapir and I were exhausted. I'd managed to find a room of our own near the port. The windows had been blown out by blast damage and it was bitterly cold. We were sleeping on bed rolls on the bare concrete floor and were surrounded by hundreds of tiny splinters of glass we'd yet to locate. I lay in the darkness for hours, my body braced for the howl of a jet or the whoosh of an incoming rocket, my mind stuffed to bursting point with images from the hospital.

We'd come to bear witness, to taste what it was like to be bombed, and the experience had been calamitous. I'd taken shots on my camera, scribbled pages of increasingly desperate notes, tried to hide behind the toughened outer shell of the disengaged observer, but none of these mind games had worked. The truth was that I'd never been under fire before, never experienced the sense of absolute helplessness when you realise that the difference between life and death comes down to a throw of the dice.

At some point that first night, I remember trying to rationalise the prospect of my own death. If it happened, I told myself, then it happened. Far, far worse were the sights and sounds that no war will ever spare you. This, for me, was the

real death. Until that day in Gaza, I'd clung to the belief that the innocent in today's world would always be spared. Now I knew better. Innocence itself had become a bad joke, a plaything of the target-jockeys in the IDF bunker in Tel Aviv. If a Palestine child had to be torn apart to protect Fortress Israel, so be it.

As dawn broke, Sapir was slumbering beside me. For the first time since we'd met, I was angry with her. I had a question to ask and I badly needed an answer.

She struggled upright, rubbing her eyes. I noticed the blood of others on the whiteness of her T-shirt.

"You're Israeli", I said. "These are your people. How can you do this?"

She looked at me, uncomprehending, and then shrugged. Seconds later, she was asleep again.

Over the days and weeks that followed, the Israelis were as good as their word. The thunder of F-16s, the terrifying chatter of Apache gunships, and the insect buzz of unmanned drones became the soundtrack of our lives. A building beside Al-Shifa was bombed, showering the hospital patients inside with glass. Then it was the turn of the Al-Aqsa TV offices. And a nondescript plastics factory. And – in increasing numbers – private family homes.

The Israelis would phone in the middle of the night. Hamas had captured an Israeli soldier called Gilad Shalit a couple of years earlier, holding him hostage against the return of Palestinian prisoners, and Israel wanted him back. The bewildered householders would protest that they hadn't a clue about Mr Shalit and begged that their home, their belongings and their loved ones be spared. Five minutes, the voice said. Leave now.

And so it went on, bombs and rockets falling like lightning strikes, seemingly indiscriminate, a pattern of bloodshed and slaughter that spread like a stain the length of the Strip. By the end of that first week, the hospitals and mortuaries were full, the staff exhausted, medical supplies gone. By this point, bearing witness had become a bit of a luxury. Like it or not, we were also in the survival business.

In some ways, by no means all, war hardens you. While you remain acutely tuned in to the roar of an approaching jet, judging when to dive for cover, you no longer hear the aftermath: the howl of sirens in the street, horns parping, alarms

kicking off, women shrieking, the chatter of small arms fire as someone vents his rage and frustration into the blueness of the sky. All this stuff becomes second nature, something you expect, something you can deal with, but there remains a preparedness, even here, even now, to be taken by surprise by the strokes the Israelis would pull and in this respect you were never disappointed.

Take New Year's Eve. By now the bombing had lasted nearly a week. The stench of raw sewage and scorched concrete was everywhere. Sapir and I had agreed to go our own ways for the day, and I'd managed to grab a seat in a shared taxi. I wanted to go down to Rafah to investigate reports of a death toll that was allegedly climbing into the hundreds but instead I found myself at a chicken farm.

The guy who owned the place had slowly built the business up until he had room for 11,000 hens. The meat and eggs found their way to countless Gazan tables. Then came the morning, three days ago, when the Israelis dropped a big bomb nearby, doubtless carefully targeted. Barely a thousand chickens survived the shockwave from the blast and the farmer was still bagging the remains of the rest when we turned up.

At eleven in the morning, it was a beautiful Gazan winter day – warm sunshine, not a cloud in the sky – and I remember standing in the cratered field amongst the stench of rotting flesh while the surviving chickens ran here and there, as bewildered and traumatised as the rest of us. This, I decided, was hooliganism on a gigantic scale, a ruthless tactical strike at the empty bellies of a million plus Palestinians already on the bread line. Think of the frappuccino joints along Dizengoff Street in downtown Tel Aviv, roadside billboards for MacD's and Pizza Hut, the brimming shelves of supermarkets in West Jerusalem, and you start to understand the depth of the Palestinians' anger.

I paid that farmer \$10 for two live chickens. He killed them on the spot and when we finally made it down to Rafah I gave them to the first two kids I met on the street. In many ways it was a pathetic gesture but however briefly it made me feel better.

Ten

By five o'clock, our tea party at the Palm Court is over and done and we're out on the pavement in Piccadilly to say our goodbyes. I've spent most of the last hour catching up with my precious daughter and we've just swapped mobile numbers. Carragh is still living out in the cottage in deepest Essex but if she gets the right "A" level grades she wants to read History and Journalism at Plymouth University and if all goes well she'll be starting next September.

Devon, she assures me, is a yummy part of the country. If she ever gets a place, she wants me to come down. She wants me to stay. She wants to make my acquaintance. It's a lovely phrase and I treasure it. I'm also quietly delighted by her choice of degree course. History and journalism are what took me to the Middle East. The McGuigan gene, alive and kicking.

Roz takes me aside. She's been monitoring our conversation over tea and I think, in the end, she's relieved. Her earlier hostility seems to have melted away. She has something to tell me.

"I phoned your mum," she says.

"About what?"

"You," she nods back at the hotel. "I said we'd be meeting. I explained you'd been in touch."

"And?"

"She says she hasn't heard from you for years."

"That's true."

"I know. And she's as hurt as I was. I gather Patrick whoever he was has gone."

Patrick O'Donovan was my step-dad, a soft-faced Kerryman who'd drifted north in search of work and stumbled over my mother. Even when I was a teenager, he had a serious drink problem. No wonder my mum saw him off.

"She wants you to phone," Roz says. "She'd appreciate a call."

She pokes around in her bag and finds the number. I glance at the prefix.
01772? Has she left Belfast?

“She’s living in Preston,” Roz says. “Maybe she wanted to be closer to you.”

Eleven

By the end of week two on the Gaza Strip, Sapir and I were sharing our draughty room by the port with a couple of Belgian NGOs. They were nice guys, as angry and quietly frightened as everyone else, but that night Sapir and I sat outside in the darkness to get a bit of privacy. For the first time in what I was bold enough to call our relationship, she dissolved into tears. She'd seen too many broken bodies, too many maimed kids, too many blank-faced little girls with empty eyes and a violent twitch at the merest hint of an explosion. She said she felt shamed by her kith and kin. The question I'd asked in what seemed half a lifetime ago – how can your people do this? – deserved an answer but alas she'd failed to come up with one.

By now, Gaza was ringed by tanks and artillery. If you went to the sand dunes along the border zone, you could glimpse Israeli faces behind the watching binoculars. These were kids themselves, she said. She'd grown up with people like these. They weren't evil. They weren't psychotic. They were simply brainwashed and lazy and incurious, much like the rest of the population. They swallowed all the propaganda shit about terrorism and Hamastan and the martyrocracy, and had never spared a moment's thought about what life might be like on the other side of Ariel Sharon's wall. Hence her decision to exile herself to the West Bank. And hence her presence, with me, in Gaza.

"With me" was the closest she'd ever got to admitting any kind of need, any kind of dependence. I didn't let it pass.

"Do you mean that?"

"About this? About the bombardments?"

"About us."

"I don't understand."

"Does it make it any easier? Me being here with you?"

I'm not sure she ever forgave me the question. I'd pounced on a rare moment of vulnerability and already I could sense her cranking up the drawbridge

again. But her face was still wet with tears and after what felt like an eternity, she simply nodded.

“Never waste your own death,” she said quietly. “Because it’s the only one you’ve got.”

At that moment, I think we held each other. I know I told her I loved her. Then, the next day, the war got abruptly worse.

By now, we’d enrolled in something called the First Responder’s course. It was pretty basic stuff – stopping blood loss, keeping breathing passages open – but it made us feel just a little bit useful.

That morning we were on standby at the hospital, waiting for a call to the next incident. We were standing outside on the patch of wasteland that served as a car park because Sapir had recently taken to smoking. Then came a series of airbursts, sudden explosions over the city spawning long tails of white smoke that sank lazily onto the teeming streets below.

At the time it had felt like a let-off – no shrapnel, none of the razor-sharp flechettes that scattered at the point of impact and peppered anything alive – and I remember telling Sapir that it was like a firework display. But within hours, men, women and children were appearing at Al-Shifal with deepening chemical burns that no one seemed able to control. The chemical turned out to be white phosphorous. It burns at very high temperatures. If you happen to be in the way, the white-hot particles burrow down through layer after layer of flesh until they hit bone. Infection is common and incredibly hard to treat. Intense pain aside, you’re talking potentially fatal damage to the liver, kidneys and heart.

That first night of the white phos attacks, Sapir and I sat with a family watching over their nine-year-old daughter. She’d been playing in the street when the airbursts came. Like so many other kids, she’d been fascinated by the shapes in the sky, long white tendrils reaching earthwards, and only when her own flesh began to smoulder did she realise she was on fire.

In the hospital that evening the child had mercifully been sedated but the truly awkward conversation was with the parents. Sapir spoke decent street Arabic. They knew she was an Israeli but because they appreciated that she’d come to show

solidarity there wasn't an ounce of bitterness towards her. Bewildered by what was happening, the parents wanted to know why the rest of the world was watching all this on their TV screens and did nothing to help. The father kept shaking his head. He just couldn't fathom it. The Israelis want to kill us all, he said. In response I could only nod. Who designs weapons like these, I asked myself. Who makes white phosphorous? And how come the Israelis can get away with using it?

We stayed a couple of hours at the bedside that night and Sapir made a point of going back to check on the child's progress over the days that followed. The little girl died the following weekend. Her name was Farah. Farah, in Arabic, means "joy".

Twelve

I phone my mother from a bench in Green Park. It's dark by now and I pull my anorak tighter against the cold.

"Mum? It's me, Charlie."

She stammers something I don't catch, puts the phone down, picks it up again, collects herself.

"Are you here?" she says. "Are you at the station? Shall I rustle something up? A fry maybe? Are you hungry?"

As gently as I can, I explain I'm in London. "On business" is a loose term but in a way it's true.

"So, are you coming up to see me? Only – "

"Not just yet, Mum."

"Then when? Tell me. Only it's been such a long time and...you know...I worry."

"No need, Mum."

"Are you OK? Do you need anything?"

This is a question I can't answer. How can I explain about Sapir? About Gaza? About the million and one things in my life that have brought me to this moment of peace in an empty London park hours before my own death? What can I say?

"I love you, Mum," I murmur. "And I want to say thank you."

And that's it. I end the call. Cut her off. Refuse to take the conversation any further. On the West Bank, suicide bombers rarely say their farewells face to face. They confine their last words to a video camera and let their actions speak for themselves. Their families, to the bewilderment of the West, are frequently proud of their son's sacrifice and grateful for the \$25,000 in hand-delivered in cash that follows.

Mansour has asked about my own wishes in this respect. I said no to the video camera but this brief, brief conversation with my mother has made me wonder about the \$25,000. I know nothing about the cost of living in Preston but maybe she could do with the money. I could put a call into Mansour but just now I know it would be breaking every rule. Maybe Sapir, I think. She has his number. She's in touch with the man. She could make it happen.

And so I call Sapir. We've talked already on this new phone, so she'll know who's trying to get through. To my surprise, she picks up at once. I try to be matter of fact. I explain the problem. I've talked to my mother. Maybe she should get Mansour's \$25,000.

"It's thirty thousand now. It just went up."

"Fine."

"So, you're really going through with it?"

"Yes."

There's a long silence. Both Sapir and I know that a couple of words from her will save my life. Some indication that we can get together again, pick up where we left off, get our precious little show back on the road. None of these cliches will ever come close to what I know we had but that doesn't matter. You had to be there to understand it, and we both were.

At length I break the silence.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"In Haifa. With my dad."

"Give him my best, yeah? Say *shalom* for me?"

I ring off. Maybe one more call when she's had time to think. Maybe.

Minutes later, still on the bench, I'm looking at a text from Carragh on my phone. *There's so much to say and not enough time. Ring me. XXX* I study the three kisses and ask myself yet again why I've left it so long. Then it occurs to me that Carragh may know nothing about my side of the family, largely because Roz would have sensibly air-brushed the McGuigan tribe out of her young life.

By now I can feel rain in the air, and so I leave the park and walk a quarter of a mile to a pub I vaguely remember off Piccadilly. Inside, I find a perch in a far corner

and unpack my laptop. Thanks to the time difference between London and New York I'm not expected at Merrist House until half past nine. I therefore have three and a half hours to pat my life into some kind of shape, get the password for the pub's wifi, and ping the results off to Carragh.

Hi Ka (you mind if I call you Ka?)

Words fail me. Black mark when you're in the writing game. You know I love you. I know you know. Here's where your Dad came from.

I was born in Crossmaglen down on the border with the Republic. Your mum may have told you already but no hard feelings if she hasn't (I mean that). December 8th 1974. We were a biggish Catholic family (the Proddies called us Taigs) and I was the youngest.

Your aunts and uncles, two of each, saved up for the big bird and left as soon as they could, except for Maureen, who may be still lurking somewhere around the border (she was a homebody from the start – got a nosebleed if she even risked the next village), Eamon, I think, is in Winnipeg now (or was). May still be working in the insurance biz. Pdraig went to a place in Ontario (Trenton?) and sold cars for a living. I always remember him being full of bullshit so he's probably a rich man by now.

Then there was Mairead, who was always my favourite. It was her who taught me how to read properly, and how to recognise a good book. She was blessed with your looks, Ka, and wasted herself on an Oz guy who blew into town one day and whisked her away. For a while I got postcards from Adelaide, and then Darwin, which was more than anyone else ever got, but these last few years we've lost touch. If she ever makes the effort to write, or even turns up (like I just did), get to know her. She'll love you. Peas in a pod. Lucky me.

I never knew my father. I was born at the height of the Troubles and I know he ran with the Provos. These were a bunch of way-out nationalists who gave the Brits an extremely hard time in what they called the armed struggle for a united Ireland (check it out if you haven't already). The suits in Westminster and most of the media called them terrorists but that says more about the Brits than people like my dad. As far as I understand, he was pretty committed, which you had to be to survive

the Proddies and the touts (informers), and he won a sizeable following among the hard men across the border in Donegal.

I once spent a week there in a town called Bunrana which looked like (and was) the Wild West. The place was crawling with retired Provos (this was way after the Troubles were over) and a couple of them had served with my Dad. They spoke well of him. He was apparently good company, and bright, and ruthless when it mattered. He did a number of operations in Belfast and a couple in Derry, but his fieldwork must have let him down because one night he was caught in a UDA ambush out in the country near Portadown and that was the end of him.

Mum always denied he had anything to do with the Provos, whom she regarded as the devil's spawn, but that can't be true because Pdraig once told me that it was Provo handouts that kept us going until he and Eamon were old enough to leave school and earn a wage.

This went on for years. Every Monday morning, without fail, this guy in a long raincoat and a longer face would knock on the door and insist on seeing Mum and hand her a brown envelope. The notes in that envelope paid off the credit Mum had negotiated with shopkeepers in the village and Mr Long Face always appeared on Mondays so we wouldn't blow the money at the weekend. That's something you ought to know about the Provos. A lot of them were teetotal, real Puritans, though not – it seems – my father.

Mum once told me he liked a drink, which was a huge admission coming from her. She said it with a smile on her face because she really missed him, and based on my own drinking habits I suspect he liked to sink a few. What I know for sure, something I'm glad I inherited, was that despite the odd Guinness he believed in fighting his corner, not just for personal reasons but because he hated the Brit presence in Northern Ireland and was prepared to put his life on the line to get the bastards out. I sympathise with that and given similar circumstances I hope I'd have the courage and commitment to do something similar.

History is made by men and women who refuse to bend the knee, Ka. My father would have been to Gaza in a flash. He'd have loved the Palestinians, as I do, and being the guy he obviously was they'd have probably loved him back. Under these circs, Ka, death can be a beginning rather than an end, a door that opens to

something worthwhile rather than the silence of the tomb or the infantile fantasies of the fucking priesthood. I expect this sounds heavy to you, but I choose to believe that people like my father, and others in the movement, had no fear of death. One day it's gonna happen anyway. How much better – more satisfying – to turn it to someone else's advantage.

And Mum? As a kid, I remember her trying to keep everything together. Years after my father was killed, she gave houseroom to a guy called Patrick (O'Donovan) who was a kind man, and well-intentioned, but lost it all to drink. He and Mum got married in the end and they were happier than you might expect because we were all fleeing the nest by that time and Mum badly needed someone to look after. I gather from Roz that he's gone now, and my first thought was that Mum had chucked him out but I'm now thinking that's unlikely because she always hated change so I guess he may have died. Maybe you could find out.

I'm sure Mum would love to see you but beware the Ulster fries. From what I understand, my dad was skinny until the day they put him in the grave but maybe that was because he lived on his nerves. Paddy O'Donovan? After half a lifetime of Mum's cooking, he probably exploded.

Thirteen

Exploded?

Sitting peaceably in this darkened bar, my glass nearly empty, not a trace of discomfort from the old man's vest, it's impossible not to try and picture what lies in waiting at the day's end. Thanks to Mansour, I at last have an opportunity to make a real difference.

Mansour is someone I respect hugely. I see him as a man of unshakeable belief, much like my father. He's pledged to the making of a Palestinian state within his lifetime and like the best chess players in Hamas he plots his next moves with infinite delicacy. Sapir described him as someone who has turned his back on the crude mass slaughter that attends martyr attacks in Tel Aviv or Haifa. The days of burned-out buses and shopping malls ripped apart are, in his view, history. But give him an opportunity to strike far higher up the food chain, to target the decision-takers who have helped create the bantustans that are Gaza and the West Bank, and he starts laying detailed plans.

Tomorrow, here in London, the Peace and Reconciliation Envoy for the Middle East will be making a major announcement. No one, least of all me, knows what he has in store, but Mansour expects the worst. He blames him for on-going complicity in Israeli land grabs. For more turns of the screw when it comes to Hamas. For the kind of mass exodus of Palestinians the Israelis have long been dreaming about.

Tonight, at a private house in Mayfair, a handful of favoured media types plus yours truly will be offered a confidential preview of tomorrow's announcement. My presence, as far as I can gather, is to bring a little credibility to proceedings. Sweet.

The P&R Envoy is a senior New Labour politician who despaired of the latter years of the Blair administration and resigned his seat at the Cabinet table. Look him up on Google and you'll discover that he had a Jewish father and a Lebanese Christian mother. He's a good-looking guy, clever as well as rich, and the photos on his website belie his age, which is 57. Years of international schmoozing have won

him powerful friends on both sides of the Atlantic and over the last couple of years, with the blessing of the UN, he's been working hard to shift the log jam on the West Bank. This is a man with huge profile. The Americans and the Brits love him. The Palestinians think he's in the pocket of the Jews. His name is David Sorenson and it's my job to kill him.

I go to the bar for another beer. I'm feeling surprisingly mellow. Reflective. Not at all angry. Prospectively, I think I've earned myself the right to straighten out a couple of things in my mind before I leave this pub, take the second left, then the first right, find the house at the end of the street, and brace myself for oblivion.

Sapir is staying at her dad's place in Haifa. I have his number on my laptop. I'll phone Sapir on his land line and put a question or two before she has the chance to end the conversation.

A couple of keystrokes take me into my directory. I'm scrolling down to Danny Dahan when a ping announces an arriving e-mail. It's Carragh. She's on the train home and she's just read the missive I despatched before I left the park.

Amazing! she's written. What a story!! Top work!!! Top Dad!!!! XXX

I gaze at the screen for a long moment. There are deep ambiguities here. My life is built on stories. Fiction – the habit of lying for a living – has seeped into my bones. Does my lovely new-found daughter believe a word I've written? Or has she consigned it to the goodie-bag of make-believe, a brief coda to *Nakba* without the pain and rage that followed? To be honest, I've no idea, though I suspect tomorrow's headlines might prompt a re-read.

Danny answers within moments of me making the call. I say *shalom* and how are you and he knows at once who I am.

"Charlie", he says. "Good to hear you."

We talk for a while. We were together in Jerusalem back in August and we reminisce about the trip to Yad Vashem. He appears to know nothing about Sapir leaving me. I ask about his dodgy leg, the one he broke falling off the horse. He says he's still limping and probably always will but he's an old guy now and it goes with the territory. This sounds very un-Danny, something close to giving-in. He and I have a relationship based on levelling with each other, which I like, and so I tell him not to give up. Not now. Not ever. The prospect makes him laugh.

“Give up what?” he says.

“Trying. You’re a tryer, Danny. Some guys let life get the better of them. You wrestle the bastard to the mat. That’s what makes you look so young. That’s what makes you such an interesting man. Your daughter’s got it too. And that’s your doing.”

This has the makings of a speech. I’m blaming the beer. A long silence settles on our conversation. Then Danny’s back on the line.

“Where is she, by the way? I haven’t heard from her for months.”

“Say that again?”

“She hasn’t been in touch. At all.”

I stare at the phone. My blood has iced. As soon as I decently can, I bring the conversation to an end. I’ll never talk to this man again and I don’t want him to remember me as rude.

“Bye, Danny”, I murmur. “*Shalom*, eh?”

Shalom means peace. Sapir has lied to me, throwing my precious resolve into confusion, turning my last evening on earth into a big, fat question mark. In a way I’m doing this thing for her, or maybe for us, for everything we’ve survived together, for everything we’ve been through. We bore witness together. Now this.

Fourteen

I drain my glass and wonder briefly about a third pint. Carrying the unshared certainty of your own death offers all kinds of surprise freedoms. Who's going to judge me for getting pissed? And why should I, past tense already, even bloody care?

The pub is filling fast. The wind has got up and the rain has started in earnest. Drinkers are streaming in from the street, brushing droplets from their hair, and pretty soon the rain has become a deluge. Cars passing the open door have their lights on. A broken gutter out the back sluices water onto a tin roof. With a gulp of Stella left in my glass, I adjust the screen on my laptop. Apocalypse time, I think. Mood music before the final curtain. What the fuck.

Hi, Ka. Me again. I want (need?) to tell you about a place in Israel. It's on the Sea of Gallilee, in the north of the country, right at the top of the lake. Jesus spent some time there. He preached from the hill that overlooks the water (the Mount of Beatitudes). He fed five thousand on five loaves and a couple of fish from the lake. He prayed at the synagogue in Capernaum. Plus, he recruited his disciples here, including the fisherman called Simon Peter. Visit off-season or wait until it's late and the tourists have gone, and the place still speaks to you. Maybe you should check it out one day. Promise me you will.

I'd never been there until Sapir told me about it. She took me there this year, early September. It happened like this.

We were standing on a street in Ramallah. We'd just come out of yet another bloody meeting and she just stopped me on the pavement and said she'd had enough. The West Bank had got to her. What she'd been trying to do all those years had got to her. The Israelis were all over everything, having their way, as ruthless and self-righteous as ever. These are her words not mine, Ka, in case you're wondering. A Jew is never wrong, she said. Which is why nothing will ever change.

To be honest, I'd sort of seen this coming. Since Gaza back in 2008 (think "Nakba"), we'd half expected the world to sit up at last and take notice but that had never happened. After the ceasefire, there was conscience money to start the rebuild but no real attempt to pull the problem out by the roots and give it a good shake.

Why? Because the Israelis wouldn't hear of it. These guys, Ka, are world class at ducking the hard questions, tugging on the world's heartstrings, setting their enemies at each other's throats, and proclaiming the virtues of their precious democracy – all the stuff that freezes history at exactly the point that suits them best. They have the rest of the Middle East, probably the rest of the planet, by the throat, and they ain't about to let go.

This doesn't do much for the Israelis, believe me. As a race they're clever, and much more self-aware than they let on. Deep down I think they know they're in the wrong, but they've backed themselves up one of history's cul-de-sacs and they can't figure out where to go next. You can sense this on the street, on the buses, everywhere. They're having a glum old time of it. No one talks much. Few people smile.

I'm bothering you with all this, Ka, because I guess it's mood music – evidence of a society rich in everything except peace of mind. Sapir, of course, is Jewish. She's just spent half a lifetime trying to apologise for her countrymen (and women), trying to put some of the damage right, and believe me you're talking courage on legs, but you sense she's about to throw in the towel you know there's big trouble in the offing. So, what did we do?

We took ourselves off to the Galilee, her idea not mine. There's a house of pilgrimage on the lakeshore at a place called Tabgha. It's run by German Catholics as a kind of retreat hotel. Sapir knew about it because she'd worked there the summer she finished her Army service and she wanted a chance to sort out the way she really felt about the stuff she'd seen over the past couple of years.

I was up for it, of course. It sounded like a holiday and we'd never had one of those. Plus, Sapir was right. You can take just so much of family advocacy, of bearing witness, of trying to put right other peoples' wrongs, before something goes snap inside you - and after that you've pretty much had it. The Israelis know this, of course. Make life tough for long enough and everyone breaks. Bummer.

And so we took a shared taxi up to Jenin and went out through the checkpoint into the Galilee. I was as skint as ever (this was before I wrote “Nakba”) and Sapir knew that, but it didn’t seem to matter. A bus took us to Tiberius and then around the lake to Capernaum Junction. From here you can walk down the road to a grove of trees around the Pilgerhaus. The guy at the check-in seemed to recognise Sapir. Full board was nearly \$200 a night, small change to the likes of proper tourists but way beyond little me. Once we’d found our room – views of the lake to die for – I asked what we were going to do about the bill. We were here for a week. That’s nearly a thousand quid in real money. It’s taken care of, she said. Don’t ask.

To my shame, I didn’t. I simply accepted that week as a gift from the gods, a stroke of good fortune I’d probably earned, and wasn’t remotely interested in who might be paying. Gift horse? Mouth? What else was I supposed to do?

We had a sublime week and for once in the time we spent together I felt normal. Why? Because we did normal things. We swam in the lake. We fantasised about loaves and fishes. We climbed the Mount of Beatitudes and whispered nonsense at the dying sun. We walked round the lake to Capernaum and sat where Jesus probably sat (no kidding) and thanked God that the Israelis had yet to get round to crucifying us. In the evenings we went to the dining hall and sat amongst plump German families and ate ourselves silly. It’s hard to explain exactly what that week meant to me but I slept like a baby every single night, something I never thought possible.

One morning towards the end of the stay we took the bus to Tiberius, which is a serious party town, and got drunk in a bar near the casino. Sapir knew a tattoo parlour a couple of blocks away and that afternoon we both got done. She chose an eye, low on her navel, the kind of eye you see on peasant fishing boats around the Mediterranean. Me? I went for a fish. You’ll find it high up on my right bicep where I’d have to wear my stripes if I was ever in the army. For the rest of our time together, which was briefer than I expected, Sapir called me Shimon. Which is the Hebrew version of Simon. As in Simon Peter. The fisher of men.

That was a week I’ll never forget. A couple of days later, back in Nablus, Sapir left me. I’ve told you that already but I still can’t get over it, understand it, come to terms with it. It haunts me, Ka. It really does. We were together – properly together

– for six years. We had everything. Yet she ended it in less than a minute. Just climbed the stairs to where I was living, said no to coffee, and told me it was over. That’s unreal, Ka. Stuff like that doesn’t happen.

And “Nakba?” I wrote it in exactly ten days. It’s not a long book, as you know, and I guess it came out fully formed. I’d been thinking about those weeks we shared in Gaza for six years, because they were the weeks that made us what I thought we’d become, and every detail, every incident, every moment we’d been through was still pin-sharp. If you want the truth, I wrote it to get her back. I sent it to her from my laptop and I know she got it. Has she read the thing? I’ve no idea. Did it work? No.

I skim back through the e-mail. It’s very long and very intimate. I don’t mind Carragh reading it. Indeed, I *want* her to read it. But I don’t want it on my laptop anymore because I now realise the days we spent beside the Galilee might speak of something very different. Not the week of my dreams at all but something darker and infinitely more troubling.

I send the e-mail to Carragh. Then delete all trace of it.

Fifteen

I look up from the laptop. The rain has stopped, and the pub is beginning to empty. I go to the bar and order another Stella. By the time I get back to my table, another couple have slipped into the empty chairs. One of them, a woman in her early thirties, has obviously been reading the stuff on my laptop.

I do my best to ignore them. They have an A-Z open on the table and they're trying to nail a hotel in Albemarle Street. They have American accents, with a slight inflection I can't quite place. They may be married but there's something else about their intimacy that tells me they aren't. They both look up at me at the same time. They need a little assistance here.

"The Chatsworth?" the woman says. "It's a hotel."

I shrug. I've never heard of it. Do they have an address?

"Albermarle Street". The man this time. "Number 44."

This time I can help them. Albemarle Street is on the route I'm about to take. I glance at my watch. 20.57. I need to be walking in through the front door at 21.25. Drinks first. Followed by an audience with Mr Sorenson, the last time anyone's going to shake his hand.

I nod at my Stella. There's no way I'm going to waste the best part of a pint, certainly not on this of all occasions.

"Can you give me fifteen minutes? I'm happy to take you there."

They're overly grateful. I ask the duty questions – what are you doing here? Holiday or business? They tell me a bit of both. The guy does something complicated in logistics, setting up distribution centres across Europe. The woman says she runs an art gallery up in Maine near the Canadian border. Coming to London is something she loves, and she says the art scene here never lets her down. So visionary. So cutting edge. And – if you know where to look – so damned *reasonable*. I nod politely. I'm trying to visualise the first guests turning up at Merrist House. I know nothing about art.

We leave the pub at quarter past nine. After the rain, it feels bitterly cold. The streets are full again and we side-step oncoming pedestrians as we make our way into Mayfair. The Chatsworth is exactly where I'd visualised it, and as we say our brief goodbyes on the pavement, I wonder why they couldn't have made this seven-minute journey by themselves. Whatever the reason, they seem happy to have met me and as I turn to leave them the woman stretches out a hand and gives mine a squeeze.

"Have a nice evening", she says. "And thanks for everything."

I smile at her and head on down the street. At the corner I glance back. They're both on the top of the steps that lead to the hotel's front door. The woman gives me a little wave. The guy is on the phone. I pause, return the wave, then turn the corner.

Merrist House is seventy metres away on the other side of the street. A black Range Rover is briefly double-parked outside. Two suited figures are getting out. Whether they're guests, or part of the Sorenson roadshow, I've no idea but I pause to take stock. The next ten minutes may well be my last. This has to work.

Sixteen

I left the West Bank six days ago. My last meeting was with Mansour. We met on the Sunday in a house behind the main mosque in Ramallah before I took the bus to Jerusalem. Security, as far as I could see, boiled down to a heavily bearded guy who appeared, at first sight, to be a cleric. He served us coffee and then collected his Kalashkinov from the corner of the room and stood guard outside in the tiny flagstoned hall that led to the street.

Mansour needed to brief me on exactly what I should expect when I got to Merrist House. Security, he warned me, would be tight and I should be prepared for a full body search in some kind of ante-room before they let me anywhere near the target. On the face of it, this sounded like a no-no. Regardless of the explosive power of the old man's vest, what was the point of blowing myself up when the target was elsewhere in the house? Was Ceramico so awesome it would bring the whole building down? Should I rely on a chunk of falling masonry to kill Mr Sorenson?

Mansour shook his head. The body search, he told me, had been taken care of. I was to expect a security detail of three men at the door. They'd all be wearing nametags. The tallest was a guy called Josh. He was the one who would take me aside, pat me down, feel the vest and wave me through. When I asked Mansour how he could be so sure about all this, he wouldn't say.

"Trust me", he murmured with just the hint of a smile. "Josh will get you in. After that, you're on your own. You're a brave man. And God will look after you."

"Amen", I remember saying woodenly. "*Inshallah.*"

Now, I'm crossing the street. The black Range Rover has growled away towards the T-junction at the end. Merrist House is a tall, handsome terraced house, white stucco, three storeys high. There's no company plaque outside that I can see so I can only assume it's a private residence donated for the evening for the cause of

peace. Fat chance, I think. I've sent my last e-mail, swallowed my last mouthful of luke-warm lager, done my best to leave my daughter with just a taste of what kind of bloke her dad might have been. What happens next will be in the hands of the media, the first scribbled notes of what might – in the end – become history.

Pausing on the pavement outside Merrist House, I glimpse a face at one of the downstairs windows. He's wearing a suit and tie. And he studies me briefly before muttering something into a microphone. I'm on the radar, I tell myself. Someone with a clipboard and a list of names is readying himself to book me in.

A flight of stone steps leads up to the front door. Immaculate gloss paint. Black. The door opens as I get to the top of the steps. Smooth, efficient, rehearsed. To my slight surprise, I find myself looking at a woman in her late twenties. For a second or two I'm gazing at Carragh ten years on: the same easy air of self-possession, the same warmth in her smile.

"Mr McGuigan?"

"Charlie,"

"Welcome." Her accent sounds North European, maybe German. She leans towards me with just a hint of conspiracy as if she wants to share a secret. "I loved your book", she says. "So powerful."

I thank her for the compliment. Amongst the faces behind her in the hall, I've spotted Josh. I wait for a moment while my new fan drapes a ribboned ID round my neck, then I offer Josh my shoulder bag. He takes it without saying a word and nods at a door to my left. I find myself in a small occasional sitting room, exquisitely furnished, dark green walls, 18th century hunting prints, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

From somewhere upstairs I can hear the low hum of conversation. Then come footsteps overhead and a bark of laughter. I'm trying to work out whether this might be Sorenson when I become aware of Josh's big hands slipping beneath my jacket and tracing the contour of the vest. His face is inches from mine, totally impassive. This isn't a man with much time for small talk and in any case I'm not sure what I'd say to him. Mansour sends his best? Tell Sapir I love her?

A face appears at the door. Two more guests have arrived. Josh has evidently finished.

“Thank you for your patience, Mr McGuigan. Take the stairs to the next floor. Someone will meet you at the top.”

Back in the hall, I recognise the two new arrivals. One has a high-profile column on a major broadsheet. The other fronts the Middle East coverage for a terrestrial broadcaster. Both believe, maybe with good reason, that Israel will always have her way. I’ve never met either of these guys but in the light of what’s about to happen the least I owe them is a nod and a smile.

One of them steps forward and shakes my hand. Like my new German friend, he’s read *Nakba*.

“Nice piece. Impressive. Well done.”

Well done? This throws me for a moment. I’m in the zone now. Three pints of Stella have taken the edge off my worst fears and I’ve talked myself into the mind-set that tells me I’m simply here to do a job of work, to right a few wrongs, to make a bit of a difference.

The two arrivals have disappeared into the sitting room. I mount the stairs. At the top, I meet another woman. She’s standing beside a uniformed waiter with a tray of drinks. Her eyes flick briefly down to my name tag.

“Good evening, Mr McGuigan. Champagne or mango juice?”

Interesting question. Definitely no Stella.

“The juice, please.”

I lift a glass from the proffered tray and make for the half-opened door along the hall. Inside, amongst the swirl of guests, I think I’ve spotted Sorenson. He’s in a circle of yet more journalists, standing beside the curtained window. He’s unmistakable: the mass of curly black hair, the sudden grin, the way he leans into conversations. He’s drinking what looks like sparkling water and he has the knack of feigning deep interest in whoever he happens to be talking to. This is a guy familiar from a thousand photos: part politician, part businessman, part diplomat, part rock star.

I step into the room, still watching Sorenson. He’s still in conversation, still nodding in agreement, but his eyes are elsewhere, scanning the room, acknowledging old mates, tipping his glass at a woman he seems to know. Then he sees me. For a second, he looks puzzled, as if he’s trying to place me in that vast

store of people he must have come across in the flesh or in briefing papers. Then his face clears, and he grins at me. At the same moment, I feel a slight pressure on my arm. Then comes the voice of a stranger.

“I don’t believe you two have met?”

“No”, I say at once. “Never had the pleasure.”

“Then let me introduce you.”

He takes me lightly by the elbow and steers me in the direction of the window. The editor has finished his story. Sorenson breaks away from the group and extends a hand. By the beam on his face, I might have known him all my life.

“Charlie”, he says at once. “Good to meet. I’m a big fan.”

I’m staring at him. He doesn’t look real. Nothing looks real. I’ve suddenly become the lead actor in a play I don’t recognise. I’ve lost the script. I don’t have a clue what to say. Now, I tell myself. The guy doesn’t need an answer. None of the usual rules apply. Here. Now. Just do it.

I return his grin, remembering the way I’d planned it. Be patient. Savour the next hour or so. Let the Man talk himself into his grave. Wait until the crowd thins. Wait until the Man is about to leave. Not yet. Not yet.

I reach for his proffered hand, trying to match the wideness of his smile, suddenly aware of something else going on behind me. Footsteps racing up the stairs, the door bursting wide open, a gasp from a woman barely feet away. Then comes a big fat hand, sweaty, clamping over my mouth.

I try to get the word out. I really do. I fight to tear the hand away. I try to bite it, try and twist my body left and right, try and kick backwards, but instinctively I know it’s useless. The hand is unyielding, implacable, pitiless. All my strength, all my resistance, has gone.

I’m dragged backwards out of the room. Faces shrink away from me. Then, still dragged backwards, my heels are clunk-clunking down the stairs. The hand on my mouth is tighter than ever, and the thumb and forefinger are pinching my nostrils.

I’m struggling to breath when I become aware that we’re back on the hall on the ground floor, and then – a moment later – I recognise the sitting room. Vaguely, I hear the slam of a door. For one last time I try and struggle free but it’s hopeless. I

barely feel the prick of the injection before the bookshelves melt into a thin grey mist and darkness, at last, overwhelms me.

*

Steve Fairfax

One

D/I Steve Fairfax is 38, twice-divorced, currently living with a new partner called Trish. It happens to be her who fields the call on Fairfax's cell phone late-ish on this same evening because Fairfax is still in the shower after three punishing laps of Chiswick Park with his running partner, a colleague from the CTC twelve years his junior.

CTC stands for Counter Terrorist Command. The Commander in charge needs to talk to Fairfax. Trish says she can take a message. Steve will be back as soon as he can. Is it urgent?

Trish hears a bark of laughter on the line.

"Do you people ever watch TV?"

"Not if we can help it."

"Have you got Freeview?"

"I think so."

"Channel 130. Check it out."

Trish is still finding the remote when Fairfax appears from the shower. He takes the phone without a word and listens to the voice at the other end while he climbs into the trousers of his suit. When Trish finally makes it to Channel 130, BBC News 24 are running a montage of suicide attacks in Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem. Fairfax knows these pictures by heart, every cut, every wobble, every breathless moment when the cameraman pans away from the broken bones of yet another bus to zoom in on the kneeling medics, on the gathering crowd, on the drift of oily black smoke.

The shot cuts to the studio newscaster. Behind her is a property Fairfax recognises in Mayfair. Merrist House. Sources in the Middle East, says the newscaster, are already laying the blame on Hamas. Fairfax has a slab of a face. He does impassive for a living, just one of the reasons Trish has made room for him in her otherwise tidy life. She's never met someone so sure of themselves, so armoured against uncertainty.

Still on the phone, still watching the TV, Fairfax nods a couple of times, grunts something Trish doesn't catch, then ends the conversation.

"Someone's tried to kill Sorenson." He's reaching for his jacket. "Don't wait up."

Invictus House stands on the Albert Embankment, upstream from the House of Commons. Past midnight, the traffic has thinned as Fairfax arrives. He leaves his Mondeo in the underground car park and swipes himself into the express lift that takes him to the seventh floor.

The investigation already has a name: Operation *Palisade*. The Major Incident Room has been fired up and civvie inputters are already feeding incoming reports into the database. Offices down the corridor contain separate intelligence cells. Fairfax finds Det-Supt Ross Bentham in the MI6 office. Bentham is *Palisade's* Senior Investigating Officer, a diminutive figure with a short temper and a big heart. Faces Fairfax has known for a couple of years glance up from their PCs and give him a nod. Bentham steers him back into the corridor.

The suspect's name, he says, is Charles Sean McGuigan. Just now he's in a private room at St Mary's hospital, Paddington, under armed guard. One of the security guys at Merrist House jabbed him with 100 mcg of Fentanyl, a doseage Bentham describes as "generous". Doctors at St Mary's are expecting him to surface between three and four o'clock in the morning.

"You want me there, sir?"

"As soon as the doctors give us the OK, we'll transfer him to Paddington Green. I want you there when he arrives. Arrest him in the Custody Suite."

Fairfax nods. Paddington Green is one of the most secure police stations in London. Under the Terrorism Act, *Palisade* will have a maximum of fourteen days to charge McGuigan or let him go.

"What are we thinking, sir?"

"We're thinking that he was about to have a pop at Sorenson. He was wearing explosives, but this thing isn't simple. The vest has gone to Tower House. No switch. No trigger that we could see."

Tower House handles fast turn-around for hot forensic items. Bentham briefly describes the moment when security jumped on McGuigan.

“He got that close? Wearing a *vest*?”

“He did, Steve. But that’s a separate issue. One of the Merrist House guys checked McGuigan before he went up.”

“So, what’s he saying? This guy?”

“Nothing. He’s done a runner.”

“Christ.”

“Exactly. Plus, they took a call on one of the landlines. No name. American accent. He told them McGuigan’s wearing a microphone.”

“And was he?”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. The guy on the line said to take McGuigan down.”

“Good advice, then. Given what might have happened.”

Fairfax checks his watch. 12.32. He thinks he knows what’s coming next and he’s right.

“You want me to handle the interviews, sir?”

“I do, Steve. McGuigan will need a lawyer. Sort that, will you?”

“Sure. Who else for the interviews?”

“Khalida. She assures me she’ll be here any minute.”

Fairfax nods. Khalida Patel is a fast-track Pakistani, Oxford educated, made D/S already, bright, ambitious, great with certain kinds of men. Good choice.

“Anything else, sir?”

“Yes.” Bentham nods down the corridor. “Andy’s doing the first pull-together. Get yourself briefed.”

Bentham steps back into the MI6 office to resume his conversation. Andy Taverner is a fellow D/I, a refugee from the Fraud Squad whose analytical skills have won him a place in Bentham’s heart. Safe pair of hands. Witty, too.

Fairfax finds him juggling two cell phones at his desk in the Major Incident Room. In a brief pause between calls, Fairfax asks him about McGuigan. Who is this man? What do we know?

Taverner nods towards his PC screen. McGuigan evidently has a website. The home page features tails of white smoke hanging over a battered cityscape.

“*Nakba?*”

“It’s a book he wrote recently. Self-published. Kindle.”

“Gaza? Sold squillions?” Fairfax is frowning. He thinks Trish may have read it.

“You got it. McGuigan’s been tucked up with the Palestinians. Six have a file on him. So does Langley.”

Langley is CTC-speak for the CIA. McGuigan, Taverner explains, has been guesting with various NGOs in Gaza and the West Bank for quite a while.

“Guestring?”

“Yeah. The way I’m reading it, he’s found himself a perch. Getting alongside NGOs is the shortest cut to good copy. Hearts and minds. Never fails. Look – “

Taverner scrolls on through the website. The *News* tag archives a series of lengthy pieces authored by McGuigan. More illustrations: hospitalised kids, wailing mothers, angry dads.

“Anyone talking to the Israelis?”

“Big time.”

“And?”

“They’ve obviously got shitloads on the man. One day they may even share some of this stuff but just now they’re too busy getting the crazies off their backs.”

“I’m not with you.”

“The Merrist House thing was a taster for a big press conference later this morning. The way I’m hearing it, Sorenson has the ear of the Americans and they’re about to invite Hamas to the table. The Israelis think that’s a very bad idea. And they think tonight proves it.”

Taverner has found a photo of Charlie McGuigan. It’s come from the Passport Office. Fairfax bends to the screen and stares at it: thin face, tatty beard, receding hairline, a hint of exhaustion or something worse around the eyes.

“What else have we got on him?”

“Nothing, yet. Except we think he may be a suicide risk.” The dryest laugh.

“Can you believe that?”

*

Khalida Patel arrives ten minutes later. She's slight, pretty, and looks younger than 29. She wears tight black jeans and a loose red top. Fairfax briefs her about Charlie McGuigan. It turns out she's read *Nakba* already, partly for work, mainly for pleasure.

"It's a girlie book?" Fairfax wants to know more.

"It's honest, Steve. Or at least it feels that way. Honest and passionate."

"A girlie book."

"You think so? Maybe you ought to give it a read. It's got pictures, Steve. A little appendix at the back in case you think this man's making it all up. My guess is he does angry for a living. Some bits of it nearly had me in tears. Either way, it's a best-seller."

They're talking in a corner of the MIR where Steve has secured squatter's rights on an empty desk. The room is filling up fast. Last time he counted, there were more than twenty detectives. Bentham has called a first squad meet for 01.00. One of the civvie inputters on the HOLMES database is attacking the whiteboard with a thick blue pentel. Operation *Palisade*. Underlined twice.

The *Palisade* squad briefing starts late. Bentham, a stickler for good timekeeping, clambers onto a chair and blames the duty co-ordinator at the Cabinet Office. Bentham has been waiting for this man's call for the best part of an hour and only minutes ago did his phone finally ring.

"Sorenson has cancelled this morning's press conference," he announces. "It ain't going to happen."

Bentham briefly explains events at Merrist House to get the squad up to speed. The news that tonight's gathering contained so many media luminaries sparks a rumble of laughter. These men and women at the sharp end of Operation *Palisade* have little time for the press and TV. McGuigan couldn't have blown up a nicer bunch of people.

Fairfax isn't laughing. He's thinking something else. He's thinking audience. If you were after maximum coverage for this little piece of theatre, what a great

setting to choose. A list of witnesses gathered in the first floor reception room at the time of the incident has appeared on the white board. It includes the Head of BBC Current Affairs, his ITV and Channel Four counterparts, and a bevy of senior journalists from the major broadsheets. To their immense surprise, and doubtless relief, these people have suddenly found themselves spared becoming part of a massive body count. No wonder the media world has gone bonkers.

Bentham has moved on. Merrist House belongs to a Russian oligarch, Sergei Milyutin, an aluminium billionaire rumoured to have the ear of Putin. Russia are big supporters of the Peace and Reconciliation initiative, hence the hospitality extended by Mr Milyutin. Just now, his employment of the missing security guard has done him no favours. Milyutin himself is away on business in South Africa. His point man in London is a fellow émigré called Nikolai Antonin. Bentham has a small team crawling over his employment files on the missing security guard.

“Abdul Hameed.” Bentham is reading from a sheet of paper. “Born in 1979 in Tunis. His father ran with the PLO when the Israelis shipped Arafat out of the Lebanon in the early Eighties.” Bentham looks up. “That came from the Israelis, incidentally, just minutes ago. Antonin never mentioned it, may never have known. Either way, it’s one of the few leads we’ve got. Maybe this guy has pedigree but maybe isn’t enough. We bear it in mind until we can firm it up. What we know for sure is that he waved McGuigan through.”

The D/S in charge of Outside Enquiries has his hand up. He wants to know why Antonin’s heavies jumped on McGuigan. Bentham explains about the phone message. Guy with an American accent. A warning about McGuigan wearing a microphone. Take him down.

“Just that, sir?”

“Just that.”

“Have we traced it?”

“Came from a call box in Grafton Street.”

“That’s Mayfair, sir.”

“You’re right.”

“CCTV?”

“Regrettably not.”

Fairfax is watching Taverner. Taverner is talking on his cell phone. Then he covers the phone and catches Bentham's eye.

"It's the hospital, sir. McGuigan's awake."

"And?"

"They've checked him out. He's good to go."

Fairfax and Khalida are at Paddington Green police station within half an hour. Fairfax makes a call to the Met Inspector still holding McGuigan at St Mary's. Bentham has changed his mind about an early-hours transfer. Better to ship McGuigan across for a 09.00 rendezvous at the custody suite.

Fairfax's eyes roll. He and Khalida now have seven hours to kill. They could go back to the Major Incident Room. He could, at a pinch, go home. Neither appeals but he knows he needs a good night's sleep before he gets an updated briefing first thing tomorrow morning.

He asks the Custody Sergeant about kipping at the nick. Only one bedroom is available.

"Any spare cells?"

"Five."

Fairfax tells Khalida to take the bedroom. He'll make do with a mattress and a blanket in the cell block. Khalida starts to protest but Fairfax ignores her. I need to get in the zone, he tells himself. I need to start being Charlie McGuigan.

Two

Fairfax is gently shaken awake at half seven. The turnkey, a plump woman with bitten fingernails, has brought him a cup of tea. Fairfax struggles upright, rubbing his eyes, wondering why he never heard the door open.

He's been dreaming of a beach he knows in Kerry. He took Trish there only a couple of weeks ago and hired a small boat. It was her first taste of the west coast of Ireland, and her first taste of fishing, and she didn't much like it when he gutted the first three mackerel and tossed the innards to the cloud of squabbling gulls but he made it up to her later. Three pints of Guinness at a pub in the village and a fish supper from a mobile chippy parked outside. They'd hired a cottage with a view of the sea and curls of peat stacked by the door. Trish had loved the busy silence, the gulls, the rasp of surf on the beach below. Paradise, she'd said. And Fairfax sensed she meant it.

Fairfax sips the tea, eyeing the open door, hearing the overnight prisoners stirring in the neighbouring cells. A week wasn't long enough. A week was nothing. If only, he thought. If only.

By the time he's showered and dressed, the Tactical Interview Advisor is waiting for him in an office beside the Custody Suite. The TIA's name is a D/S called Gerry Austin. Fairfax has worked with him on countless jobs and trusts him 100%. It's up to Austin to capture and shape the latest intelligence for the benefit of Fairfax and Khalida and he's been up all night making sure that nothing slipped through his net. *Palisade* is beyond high profile. They have to get this right.

Austin has found a bacon bap from somewhere. He pushes the plate across the desk. The bap oozes brown sauce. Fairfax loves brown sauce.

"McGuigan?" he asks.

"The transfer's booked for nine thirty, boss. He should be here by quarter to ten. You're arresting him on suss attempted murder. His brief is a woman called Alice Devereux."

"What's he told us so far?"

“Nothing.”

“Not a word?”

“Zilch.”

Khalida arrives, standing over Fairfax while Austin sorts another chair. When Fairfax asks whether she had a good night’s kip, she simply nods. She hates the smell of bacon.

Austin returns with the extra chair. Time is moving on. Headlines first. The file is building on Abdul Hameed, the security guard at Merrist House who has gone missing. Tipped off by the Americans, MI6 have been aware of him for a while. In 1990, he moved from Tunis to Kuwait where he evidently spent a couple of months hanging out with Khaled Mishal.

“You mean Mr Hamas,” says Khalida.

“I mean Mishal. These were early days. He was on the rise then.”

Fairfax is dabbing at his mouth with a paper napkin. He knows a great deal about Mishal, and he has considerable respect for the man: devout, intelligent, determined, austere. “Hanging out” isn’t a phrase he’d associate with the suited fundamentalist who now heads Hamas.

“So, what happened to Hameed after Kuwait?” he asks.

“He came here,” Austen says. “Five kept an eye on him. The guy’s apparently a martial arts fanatic, hence the tie to the security biz. He worked for a bunch of Arabs first. Now Milyutin.”

“He’s been there long?”

“Barely a month.”

“When was the Sorenson event organised?”

“Five months ago. At that stage it was to be a routine update though people in the know sussed that something big was happening with Hamas. They played a blinder during *Protective Edge*. A performance like that has consequences.”

Protective Edge was Gaza’s latest taste of Israeli retribution. Months earlier, three young Jews had been abducted and killed on the West Bank. After weeks of bombardment, the Gazan bodycount had topped two thousand.

Fairfax nods. Gerry Austin’s right. Hamas weathered the ferocious Israeli assault and was still standing after the ceasefire.

“The Sorenson event was always going to happen at Merrist House?”

“Yes.”

“And security was down to Milyutin?”

“Yes.”

“So, Hameed came on board when?”

“Two months ago.”

“That’s just after the ceasefire in Gaza. Hamas were on a roll.”

Fairfax shoots Khalida a look. He’s taught her to mistrust the power of coincidence. Khalida writes herself a note and then glances up at Austin.

“We’re thinking the guy was some kind of Hamas plant?” She says.

“Extending their reach?”

“It’s a possibility,” Austin nods. “He certainly got McGuigan close to Sorenson.”

“To kill him?”

“That might be a reasonable inference.”

“Why?” This from Fairfax. “What’s the point? The Hamas people are halfway to becoming respectable. Sorenson’s a part of that. Why blow him up?”

“I’ve no idea,” Austin says. “Except they have a reputation to protect. These people play hardball. They’re wedded to violence. They think it’s the only language the West understands. If they sense an opportunity, they take it. Nailing a target like that in the middle of London? Scoring headlines across the globe? Can you imagine the reaction on the streets? Ramallah? Gaza City? These people are politicians in the end. They need support, votes. It’s called democracy.”

Fairfax says nothing. There’s a sub-text here. Islamic State jihadists in Iraq and Syria have raised the bar as far as the West is concerned. This bunch of psychopaths, wedded to public beheadings, have put Hamas in the shade. Maybe the guys from Gaza want to make up lost ground. Maybe.

Austin has one finger anchored in his notes. He looks up.

“We had a call first thing from a hotel up in Finchley. A Travelodge. The woman who’s come forward works in reception. She recognised McGuigan from the shots on TV.”

“And?”

“He turned up at her hotel yesterday, not once but twice. Room 235. Rented to an Arab calling himself Mohammed Zatoun. One night only. McGuigan paid him a visit yesterday morning. Stayed, she thought, the best part of an hour. Back again before lunch.”

“Why?”

“He wanted to talk to Zatoun again, but she said he’d gone.”

“Right,” Fairfax is leaning forward now. “So, he had no contact details for Zatoun?”

“It seems not.”

“What else did he say?”

“Not much. She thought the guy was in a bit of a state.”

“What kind of a state?”

“Nervous. Anxious. Pushy. He wanted the girl to give him a number for Zatoun.”

“And she refused?”

“Yeah. Client confidentiality.”

The room, he says, has been sealed off. Scenes of Crime should be boshing it any time now.

Khalida wants to know more about Zatoun. Austin slips a couple of photos across the desk. One of them is a head and shoulders shot retrieved from Zatoun’s Qatari passport photocopied at the Travelodge. The other one features a younger-looking man without a trace of grey in his beard. He’s walking alone through a crowded souk, his face tilted up in the slash of sunshine between the darkness of the shops.

Fairfax studies it a moment.

“He’s a bomb maker,” Austin nods at the photo. “He lives most of the time in Hebron. Learned his trade from Yehiya Ayyash.”

Fairfax is still looking at the face in the souk. He knows about Ayyash. Everyone in Counter Terrorism Command knows about Ayyash. This is the techie genius from the West Bank, the bombmaker who perfected the suicide vest, who despatched young martyrs across the Green Line into West Jerusalem and Tel Aviv during the First Intifada and made Israel bleed. They called him “The Engineer”, and

countless atrocities later the Israelis finally managed to blow him up with a planted mobile phone containing 15 grams of RDX.

“You’re telling me this guy was tight with Ayyash?”

“The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. He’s older than Ayyash and probably wiser. Which is why he’s survived.”

“But still active?”

“We can only assume so.”

“Who says?” Fairfax gestures at the photos, at the file. “Where did this stuff come from?”

“Tel Aviv,” Austin is grinning. “We were in touch first thing this morning and they were back within the hour. Even Bentham’s impressed.”

McGuigan arrives at Paddington Green police station at 09.41. He has a sizeable escort – no less than four badged cars – which is just as well. A noisy media presence has been gathering for the past half hour and the scrum of cameramen, reporters and stills photographers spill off the pavement and into the road. Fairfax has no idea who may have tipped off these people but imagines the call has to have come from sources close to Downing Street. This is no ordinary enquiry. Already, *Palisade* sits squarely in the laps of the politicians.

Fairfax is watching McGuigan emerge from the chaos outside. His minders have formed a flying wedge, forcing their way through the barrage of shouted questions, and only McGuigan’s face is visible. He’s smaller than Fairfax had anticipated, and he looks impassive, his eyes giving nothing away. Only when he’s almost within touching distance, free from the mob, does Fairfax realise that he’s still wearing the grey one-piece forensic suit they must have given him at the hospital when they took away his clothes for analysis. The message this image sends is all too obvious. Change the colour to orange, check out his manacled wrists, and McGuigan is already Mr Terrorist, halfway to Guantanamo Bay.

Fairfax meets him at the Custody Sergeant’s desk and makes the formal arrest under the Terrorism Act. McGuigan confirms his name but has nothing more to say. When the Custody Sergeant asks for an address, he simply shrugs. Fairfax asks him to repeat the question – *Palisade* needs to seal off the property – but

there's no response. He looks dazed. Maybe it's the anaesthetic, Fairfax thinks. Or maybe this sudden reprieve from certain death. Within a minute, still under escort, McGuigan has disappeared into a nearby office to meet with his solicitor.

Gerry Austin has been on the phone to the Major Incident Room. He ends the conversation and steers Fairfax to one side. The news from the Major Incident Room isn't good. These days, social media is a normally reliable treasure trove of information.

"McGuigan's registered with the lot," Austin says. "Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, Good Reads, you name it. Plus, he has his own website."

"And?"

"Zip. Fuck-all. Apart from a day or so of stuff when he published his book, he's Mr Invisible. This is a game the guy doesn't play. Strange. People are reading the book, firing him questions, telling him how clever he is, telling him he's changed the way they look at the world, all that internet shit, but he never gets back to them, never comments, never even acknowledges them. Odd, really. He's the one who triggered the shit storm by writing the thing. Now, he's dropped off the radar."

"Friends on Facebook?"

"None."

"None?"

"None."

Fairfax absorbs the news. Last night, before he'd left the MIR, he'd read an e-mail retrieved from McGuigan's laptop, sent that same day. It spoke at length of a man – a father – long separated from his family, and there was something in him that had warmed to this voice. Fairfax has kids he rarely sees. He understands loss. He's been there. Is he surprised that McGuigan has turned his back on the clamour of Facebook? Not in the slightest.

Fairfax meets McGuigan's lawyer half an hour before the first interview is scheduled to begin. She turns out to be a lean, olive-skinned thirty-something with a serious gym-addiction and the trace of a foreign accent. He understands she works *pro bono* for *Solstice* because she admires their take on more or less everything she

deems important in life and seems quietly pleased to be representing the author of *Nakba*.

When it comes to disclosure, Bentham has insisted that Fairfax go no further than the suicide vest now under analysis at Tower House, and when Ms Devereux wants to know whether the device would have been viable, Fairfax tells her that so far there are no indications to the contrary. This isn't strictly true but both of them understand the evidential implications of choosing to shake hands with an ex-cabinet minister while wearing two kilos of high explosive.

"Unfortunate," Devereux says, collecting her notes and heading for the door.

Fairfax, watching her leave, can only agree. He's curious to know whether McGuigan has off-loaded on her, indeed whether he's said anything at all. In her shoes, he'd be inclined to advise the fullest possible co-operation – names, contacts, dates, motivation, the full cough – in the hope of mitigation when it comes to sentencing, but Fairfax knows only too well that cases like these can be tricky. Raw belief has a habit of defying all logic. Christ, the guy might even go No Comment, a tactic as suicidal and lunatic as wearing the vest itself.

He thinks again about the slight manacled figure in the grey forensic suit, bobbing along on the media tide, so briefly the centre of the world's fleeting attention. Can you be sectioned for planning – willing – your own death? He isn't sure.

Three

The first interview starts at 11.29. The preliminaries over, Fairfax settles in his chair, eyeballing McGuigan. McGuigan returns his unblinking gaze, showing no emotion. A word to his minders from Fairfax and the handcuffs have been removed. His hands now lie on the desk, well-formed hands, long fingers, the fingers – Fairfax thinks – of a writer, an artist, a thinker. What, in God’s name, is he doing here?

Minutes earlier, Fairfax has agreed with Gerry Austin to press McGuigan on the issue of his address. If nothing else, this first interview must speed the investigation forward. A Scenes of Crime team are on five-minute standby. If need be, a helicopter will fly them to wherever McGuigan has been living. *Palisade* needs fresh leads. Urgently.

The silence in the room is becoming oppressive. Khalida is on the point of taking the lead when Fairfax stirs.

“It must feel strange to be still alive”, he says softly.

Surprise puts a flicker of a smile on McGuigan’s face. For a fleeting moment, Fairfax glimpses the person he must be behind the mask. Sensitive, definitely. With a pleasing hint of irony.

“You’re right,” he says. “Who’d have thought?” A light voice. A trace of Belfast.

“Did you ever think you’d end up here?”

“No.”

“Disappointed?”

“Worse.”

“Ashamed?”

“Deeply.”

“Why?”

“Because I failed.”

“Failed to kill Sorenson?”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re admitting it?”

A brief pause. A tiny flutter beneath one eye. Then the smile again. Broader.

“You mean failing to kill him?” He says.

“I mean wanting to kill him.”

“Of course. Why else would I be there?”

Why else, indeed. In less than a minute, Fairfax has established this man’s guilt. He could stop the interview there. He could take McGuigan’s scalp to the MIR, hand it to Bentham, or maybe to the Commander himself, and leave the rest to the lawyers at the Crown Prosecution Service. Charlie McGuigan, the self-confessed suicide bomber who came within inches of killing one of the most high-profile Prime Ministers in recent history. But it doesn’t end there. Because it can’t.

“So why did you do it?”

McGuigan reflects on the question. The deadness in his eyes has gone. He’s alert, engaged. However briefly, he wants to be part of this.

“Why doesn’t matter,” he says at last. “Why is for me to keep. What you really want to know is how. And there, I’m afraid, I can’t help you. All you need to be sure about, all you need to write down, is that I admit it. I set out to kill Sorenson. And I failed.” His eyes stray briefly to the cassette machine, to the whirring tapes. “It’s all there. You’ve got it. Anything else would be greedy.”

“On my part?”

“Of course. Don’t think I’m blaming you. I’m not. It’s your job to collect evidence. I understand that. But the point of this exercise is to establish my guilt and I sense we’ve done that already. Am I right?”

Fairfax considers the proposition. This interview is rapidly evolving into something much closer to a conversation and he likes that a lot. Maybe they should head for the nearest bar, have a drink or two, relax. There’s a lot more to come and Fairfax suspects that McGuigan knows it. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, this is a loner who likes an audience, or at least a listening ear.

Khalida glances briefly at Fairfax, who nods.

“Mr McGuigan...” she begins. “We think we already know why you did it. In fact, half the world knows why you did it.”

"You've read my book?"

"I have."

"As part of your job?"

"Not at all. I read it because of word on the internet, because friends recommended it, because it had such an impact."

"And?"

"It made me weep."

"It did?" Another surprise. Fairfax suspects McGuigan hasn't prepared himself for this. He shifts uncomfortably in his chair. He asks for a glass of water. Moments later, the door opens and a WPC steps in with a carafe and four glasses.

McGuigan looks first at the WPC, and then at Fairfax.

"How many people do you have monitoring this interview?"

"Dozens." Fairfax says. "Hundreds. Get used to it, my friend. You're the star attraction."

"I don't believe you."

"You're right not to. Do we have people watching? Of course, we do. Three, to be precise. Why? Because this isn't just about you anymore. What you did last night has implications. We have to bottom those implications out. Why? Because an incident like that should never have happened in the first place. And it's our job to make sure it never will in the future. Does that sound reasonable?"

"Yes."

"So where would you like to start?"

A slow shake of the head from McGuigan. In his view it's over, finished, done.

"I've given you everything you need," he says. "The only word I haven't heard is thank you."

McGuigan's brief is studying her fingernails. Khalida does her best to mask her amusement. Fairfax suspects she's falling in love with this elfin man across the table. Not only can he reach her on paper, but the spell appears to work in the flesh. The sleepy eyes. The hint of a smile, now he's relaxed, that never really leaves his face.

Khalida is about to launch another question but a glance from Fairfax pulls her back.

"I get the feeling you think you've done your duty," Fairfax says.

"By fucking up?"

"By confessing. Confessing is very definitely second best to blowing yourself up but at least you're not troubling us with a denial. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"And you're really going to leave it at that?"

"Yes." He glances at his solicitor. "I assume I have the option."

She nods. As does Fairfax.

"Of course, you have the option, Mr Guigan. We can leave it here. We can charge you. That will take less than a minute. After which there'll be no more questions. We have the evidence. We can make the case stick in court. You'll go away for a very long time. But you know what? That will be a real shame. And you know why? Because we won't have the whole picture." He paused, knowing he had McGuigan's full attention, then he leaned forward over the table. "Do you have the whole picture, Mr McGuigan? Because something tells me that you don't."

McGuigan held his gaze. His eyes were troubled now. Another development he hadn't anticipated.

"I'm not hearing this," he said at last. "I give you everything you want and you tell me it's not enough."

"You've given us nothing. You've told us you fucked up. We knew that already and thank God you *did* botch the thing. What we need to know now is why you did it, what you thought you might achieve. Was it fame? Or was it infamy?"

"Neither. *Nakba* has brought me fame, of a sort, and it sucks. Fame takes you nowhere. Fame makes you disappear up your own backside. Fame turns you into someone you wouldn't ever want to meet."

"And Gaza? The West Bank? What did that turn you into?"

The question stops McGuigan in his tracks. He wants, very badly, to answer it but he's nervous about where it might lead next.

"Is any of this stuff relevant?"

“Probably not. I’m just interested. You’re a writer. Writers want the whole picture, every last detail. They need to get into the heads of other people. That’s what cops do, too. It’s no big secret.”

“You want to get into *my* head?”

“I do. The way I understand it, you were out there in the Middle East for a while. You saw things, heard things, formed impressions, met people, tried to make sense of the place. That must have changed you. I just want to know how.”

McGuigan looks from face to face. Fairfax senses he’s in deep now, treading water.

“The white phos,” Khalida says softly. “Tell us about the white phos, Charlie. And tell us about the little girl. Farah.”

“She died.”

“I know she died. But *why* did she die?”

“Because of the phos.”

“And because of the Israelis?”

“Of course.”

“And the West? People like us? People like Sorenson? Is that why you tried to blow him up? Because of the phos? Because of Farah?”

“That’s simplistic.”

“Of course, it is. But it’s probably true, as well. Or am I wrong here?”

McGuigan doesn’t answer. He’s looking at the ceiling, marshalling his thoughts.

“You’re right to think the West Bank changes you,” he says at length. “It’s the same in Gaza except maybe worse. You wouldn’t be human unless it changed you.”

“Did it make you angry?”

“Very.”

“And what else?”

“It made me feel impotent. Anger you can turn to some account. Impotence takes you nowhere. You feel bound hand and foot. You feel useless. You feel no one’s interested. Because no one’s listening. Ask any Palestinian. They’re the experts.”

“Is that why you tried to blow up Sorenson?”

“No. That’s why I wrote. Writing, believe it or not, empowers you. It gets the word out. Story’s a remarkable thing. It’s a kind of magic. It’s a spell. People see things differently if you get it right.”

“But you’re telling us *Nakba* is fact.” This from Fairfax. “Am I right?”

“Yes. Down in Gaza I didn’t have to make anything up. Villains. White phos. Heroes.” He spreads his hands wide, a gesture of both wonderment and disgust. “The book wrote itself.”

“So, who was the woman?” Khalida asks. “In the book you call her Hannah. What’s her real name?”

McGuigan stares at her. Then shakes his head.

“No,” he says.

“No, what? No, she doesn’t exist?”

“No, I’m not going there.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s none of your business.”

“She *does* exist? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I’m telling you nothing.”

“Is she Israeli? Like she is in the book?”

“No comment.”

“Is she still alive?”

Alarm gives him away. It starts in his eyes and spreads. He’s frowning now. What do these people know that I don’t?

“You’re telling me this woman is dead?” Khalida won’t give up.

“I’ve no idea.”

“But she *is* Israeli?”

The momentary pause tells Khalida everything she needs to know. She bends to her notes, trying to establish a timeline.

“In the book you’ve been together for quite a while, years certainly. *Cast Lead* happened in 2008. By then, were you living together? That’s certainly what it felt like.”

“*Nakba* was a fiction. You take liberties.”

“You just told us it was fact.”

“Gaza was fact. What happened down there on the ground was fact.”

“And the love affair? You’re telling me you *invented* that?”

Fairfax smiles. Khalida sounds genuinely disappointed.

“I write what I write,” McGuigan shrugs. “If you choose to believe that Hannah is real, then that’s your call. Make of her what you will. What matters is the rest of it. The kids. The ruined houses. The body counts. The attacks on hospitals, on schools, on aid workers. The sheer fucking savagery of these people.”

“But that’s the way Hannah feels. Almost word for word.”

“I know.”

“So, is the real Hannah just as outraged? Just as committed?”

McGuigan says nothing. Just looks at her. Fairfax waits for Khalida to press her advantage home. Brilliant, he thinks. Pitiless, shrewd, and bang on the money.

“You used the word ‘spell’ just now,” Khalida begins. “Is that the way it was for you in real life? Whoever Hannah might be? Has this woman worked her magic on you? And are you still spellbound?”

McGuigan’s eyes are starting to glisten. He swallows hard and ducks his head. Khalida extends a comforting hand across the table. Fairfax is watching McGuigan closely. Living the last hours of your life must take its toll. Especially if you’re still alive at the end of it.

Khalida is apologising to McGuigan. She didn’t mean to upset him. McGuigan stares at her. He looks abject, lost. This is a man who’s slipped his moorings, Fairfax concludes. He recognises the despair, the bewilderment, only too well. So far, the Israelis have been slow to share their file on Charlie McGuigan. The first e-mail from Tel Aviv barely extended beyond a handful of dates and a couple of addresses. No mention so far of a woman in his life.

“You lived in Jenin for a while back in 2006.” Fairfax takes up the running, trusting the Israeli e-mail.

“That’s right,” McGuigan says. “Amazing place.”

“And afterwards you went to Nablus?”

“Yes.”

“Where you’ve stayed pretty much since?”

“Yes. Except for the weeks in Gaza.”

“Where you wrote *Nakba*?”

“Where I went through the bombardments. The writing came much later.”

“How much later?”

“I wrote it in September. It happened very quickly. Ten days.”

“You mean September this year?”

“Yes.”

“That’s six years later.”

“Yes.”

“So why the gap?”

McGuigan is staring at him. No way did he ever intend to let these strangers anywhere near him. Now this.

“I waited six years because I never thought I’d have to write it.” His voice is soft.

“Why’s that? You really thought the Israelis would cave in? Give the Palestinians everything they wanted? You really thought that? Living out there on the West Bank? A settlement on every hilltop? The wall? The settler-only roads? The checkpoints? The pass laws? There’s no way peace will ever happen, is there?”

“None.”

“So is that why you took the decision to write the book? To come to London? To wear the waistcoat? To try and blow up Sorenson?”

“Yes.” McGuigan’s voice is stronger now. “That’s exactly it.”

“A terrorist, then. Pure and simple.”

“A human being. Far from pure and hopefully far from simple.”

“Here to kill Sorenson.”

“Yes.”

“Plus countless others in that room.”

“Yes.”

“To make some kind of difference?”

“Yes.”

“And you think that would have worked?”

“Yes.”

“Why? How come?”

“Because violence, in the end, is the only language that matters. The Israelis have talked peace into the grave.”

“Is that what your Hamas friends have told you?”

“It’s what I worked out for myself.”

“Sure, Charlie.” Fairfax offers him a cold smile. “And I expect what happened to your dad helped there.”

Mention of his father narrows McGuigan’s eyes. The sudden drumbeat of questions has unsettled him. He appears to have forgotten about his laptop and yesterday’s e-mails to Carragh.

“You know about my father?”

“We know everything, Charlie.”

“Then why are we here? Why all these questions? Why not bring this thing to an end? You know I did it or tried to do it. And you’ve probably worked out why, by now. Just charge me, yeah? Just let me get this thing over.”

He holds out his thin wrists, as if inviting the handcuffs back again, a gesture Fairfax interprets as a taunt. Then his phone begins to ring, signalling an incoming text. Fairfax glances at caller ID. Gerry Austin. SOC ANALYSIS ON WAISTCOAT COMPLETE, it reads. WE NEED TO TALK.

Fairfax looks up, then glances at his watch. Time for a break, he announces. Back in half an hour.

Four

Fairfax and Austen conference in an office on the other side of the building. The window looks out over the street and Fairfax realises that the press pack have yet to disperse. Who's told them to count on a short interview? Why are they expecting McGuigan to emerge so soon?

Austen has just finished yet another conversation with Bentham at the MIR. Two more leads have surfaced. One of them is the manager of a Vodafone shop in the Edgware Road. He, too, has recognised McGuigan from the press coverage. This is a guy, he says, who paid a visit to his store only yesterday morning.

"What did McGuigan want?"

"He was reporting a missing phone. Said he'd left it on a bus. Wanted the guy to blacklist the number."

"And?"

"The guy didn't believe him. He did what McGuigan asked but said there was something odd about him."

"Like?"

"He was nervous, anxious, hyper, just like the woman described him at the Travelodge."

"Right. Do we have the number of the missing phone?"

"We do. The comms guys are working on it."

Fairfax nods. He wants to know about the second lead.

"Another sighting, boss. A pub this time, just round the corner from Merrist House. The girl behind the bar served McGuigan a couple of pints, maybe three. She says it was mid-evening. She thinks he left around nine. There were a couple of other people at his table. They were talking."

"CCTV?"

"We're on it."

"Right. So where are we with the vest?"

Austen has been talking direct to the analysts at Tower House. They've confirmed that McGuigan's vest could only have been voice-activated. This is something of a departure in the technology of suicide attacks and they've concluded that it would have needed a specific word to trigger the explosion. Without that specific word, they have no means of knowing whether the device would have worked or not.

"McGuigan has to know the word", Austin says. "Has to."

"And we need it."

"For sure."

Fairfax nods. Choosing a single word to bring your life to an abrupt end is a novel proposition.

"I think I'd go for *Arsenal*," he says. "Last time I watched them they were dead on their feet."

Austen turns away, shaking his head. Fairfax has a reputation for straying off the reservation but turning a near-disaster into a sick joke is breaking new ground.

"You've got a problem with where we are with McGuigan?" Fairfax is trying to coax a smile.

"Not at all, boss. You got a cough. That was clever. But we need LOEs now, something solid, something we can work on. Maybe you could start with the trigger word." He peers hard at Fairfax. "Do I hear a yes?"

LOE is cop-speak for Line of Enquiry. Back in the interview room, Fairfax wants to know about McGuigan's meeting with Mohammed Zatoun, the alleged bombmaker. Scenes of Crime have boshed Room 235 and confirmed traces of explosive on the spare bed.

"You went to the Travelodge in Finchley Road yesterday morning," Fairfax says. "Who did you meet there?"

The question takes McGuigan by surprise. Such an abrupt change of direction.

"An old guy." He says. "An Arab from Hebron."

"Why?"

“He made the waistcoat. I supplied the measurements he needed, and he did the rest. I put the thing on, and he made some adjustments.”

“What else happened?”

“He fitted the explosives. They were shaped. They slipped into the panels he’d made.”

“You tried it on?”

“Yes.”

“How did it feel?”

“It felt light. Lighter than I’d expected.”

“He explained how it worked?”

“Of course. It was voice-activated. I had to record a word. He did the rest.”

“Did he know the word?”

“No. Only I knew the word.”

“And what was the word?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“We do, Charlie. We do.”

“No,” he’s shaking his head. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s mine. Because it’s the one thing I’ve got left. No way am I ever telling anyone.”

Fairfax studies him for a long moment. In a similar situation, he thought, I’d also be digging in. My face is all over the media. People with huge resources are crawling all over my life. Here in this room I’ve already shared far too much. And so one tiny part of me has to remain private. The word. Mine and mine alone.

“Tell me more about the old man.”

“I can’t. I know nothing about him.”

“His name?”

“He never told me.”

“But you say he came from Hebron.”

“That’s what I’d been told. Back on the West Bank.”

“Who by?”

Another tiny flicker of alarm. So easy to underestimate these people. So easy to let them far too close.

“Who by, Charlie?”

“No one in particular. Everyone knew about him.”

“Then he must have had a name.”

“They just called him the bombmaker. Or the old man.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Suit yourself.”

Khalida was studying her file. Then she looked up.

“You went back to the hotel, Charlie. To the Travelodge. Why did you do that?”

“I thought I might have left something there.”

“Like what?”

“An address book.”

“Was it important?”

“Yes. I’m old fashioned that way. I like to write things down.”

Fairfax smiled. More fiction.

“You’re lying, Charlie. We know why you went back. We’ve talked to the receptionist. You were trying to find the old man. Why was that?”

McGuigan sat back and closed his eyes. He looked suddenly exhausted. He needed to keep track. He wasn’t in training for this.

“No comment,” he said softly.

“That’s not helpful, Charlie. We need to know.”

A slow shake of the head. Enough, he seems to be saying. The silence stretched and stretched. A rumble of traffic through the double glazing. A faraway siren growing slowly louder then receding again.

Fairfax consults the notes he made while talking to Gerry Austin.

“After going to the Travelodge yesterday you went to a Vodafone shop on the Edgware Road. Why was that, Charlie?”

“I’d lost my phone.” His eyes are still shut. He wears a pained expression. How much more do these people know?

“Where did you lose it?”

"I don't know. On a bus? On the tube? In a café? It could have been anywhere."

"Which bus did you take, Charlie? And when were you on the tube?"

"I can't remember."

"Try."

He shakes his head again. He wants this thing to stop. Khalida leans forward. The touch of her hand on his arm makes him physically jump.

"We've talked to the manager at the Vodafone shop, Charlie. He says you were extremely keen to have him blacklist your mobile, turn it off, no calls in or out. Why was that?"

"Because I didn't want some stranger running up a huge bill."

"That can't be true, Charlie."

"Why not?"

"Because very soon you're going to be dead. You've admitted it earlier. You have an appointment you're determined to keep. Half past nine that same evening. That's when you were logged in to Merrist House. After that, Charlie, it's all over. Why would you be worried by a mobile bill?"

It's a good question and McGuigan is far too intelligent not to spot the trap that Khalida has laid for him. Finally, with a gesture close to helplessness, he tells her about going to Hampstead Heath, about sitting by the kids' play area, about browsing long-ago photos of his infant daughter on his smart phone, and about the Eastern European guy who was so suddenly sitting beside him.

"I didn't realise at first," he says.

"Realise what?"

"That he was there to mug me. He didn't seem threatening, not in the least."

"So what happened?"

"We talked for a bit, just this and that, football mainly, then he produced a knife."

"And?"

"He wanted my wallet."

"And the phone?"

"Of course."

"You gave it to him?"

"I had no choice."

"But you did, Charlie. You could have blown him up."

McGuigan stares at him, then realises that Fairfax means it as a joke. Fairfax wants a description of the man.

"Thirty something. Jeans. Open white shirt. Needed a shave."

"White?"

"Yes, like I said, Eastern European. The guy had an accent. Romanian? Bulgarian? I don't know."

Khalida has been making notes. Fairfax asks whether he'd recognise the man again.

"Of course."

"So off he went with your wallet? And the phone?"

"Yes. I always keep one debit card separate. I still had that."

"Which direction did he go?"

"Back towards the main road."

"Obviously you didn't contact the police."

"No."

"So why all the angst? The phone's gone. Big deal. In twelve hours you're going to be dead. There are priorities here, Charlie. Why the visit to Vodafone?"

McGuigan has no answer to this question. He beckons his solicitor closer, whispers something in her ear. She looks startled and then shrugs. Up to you, Fairfax thinks. Your call.

His head comes round. His eyes find Fairfax.

"The phone was a back-up device," he says. "That was my idea. If I forgot the trigger-word, I could always use the phone."

"How?"

"By dialling a number."

"What was that number?"

McGuigan looks at his solicitor again. This time she nods.

"1717," he says.

Fairfax writes the number down. McGuigan is watching him.

“Why do you need all this?” he asks.

Fairfax doesn't answer for a moment. Then he pushes his notepad to one side and looks up.

“Because we have to satisfy ourselves that the device was viable,” he says. “That it would have worked.”

“You're telling me you think it wouldn't?”

“Anything's possible, Charlie.” Fairfax is smiling now. “That's why we're here.”

Five

Fairfax and Khalida drive back to the MIR at lunchtime for a brief conference with Bentham and Taverner. Bentham doesn't hide his irritation that McGuigan is still refusing to offer any kind of address. *Palisade* badly needs new leads and wherever this man has been living would be a very good place to start.

"I can't force him, boss. This isn't the Middle East."

Bentham nods, says nothing. Fairfax has phoned earlier with the news about the mugging on Hampstead Heath. A small army of uniformed officers have descended on the area, working slowly outwards from the bench McGuigan occupied beside the swings. All they have is McGuigan's description, soon to be reinforced with a photofit, but if they recover the phone the forensic analysts at Tower House will do the rest. 1717. Maybe the key to *Palisade's* door.

One of the civvie inputters knocks at Bentham's door and comes in with a tray of sandwiches. Bentham is still looking at Fairfax.

"So what's your feeling so far? About McGuigan? Where's this man coming from? What's his motivation?"

Fairfax nods at the civvie and helps himself to a cheese and pickle between limp slices of white bread.

"I think he's genuine, sir," he says at last. "I think he meant it."

"Meant what?"

"To kill Sorenson."

"But why? Why would he do a thing like that?"

"Because the man's angry. I also think he's damaged."

"By what he's seen on the West Bank? In Gaza? All the stuff he put in that book of his?"

"Partly, yes. But there has to be more."

"Sure. Good call, Steve. Blinding insight. But what?"

Bentham has a famously short fuse and Fairfax can only guess at the pressures *Palisade's* SIO must be under. Any minute now, he thinks, and this conversation will become a serious ruck.

"There's a woman in his life," Khalida says quietly. "That might be a good place to start."

"You're talking about his daughter? Or his ex-wife?"

"No, sir. The clue's in the book, in *Nakba*. There, he calls her Hannah."

"And you're telling me this woman exists? In real life?"

"Yes."

"So where is she? What's her name? What's the story? Where does she fucking *fit* in all this?"

"I don't know, sir. We've asked him endless times, in all kinds of ways, but he simply won't go there, won't even admit she exists. If you're looking for trauma, in my view she fits the bill."

"Trauma? I've lost you."

"There has to be an explanation for what McGuigan tried to do. Millions of people are incensed about what the Israelis are up to on the West Bank, in Gaza, but very few of them, especially Westerners, especially non-Muslims, would sign up for the suicide vest. Here, sir...bear with me a moment."

Khalida dives into her shoulder bag and pulls out a wad of notes. They turn out to be quotes she's extracted from *Nakba*. One of them comes from a passage towards the end of the book. The narrator – a thinly disguised Charlie McGuigan – is in bed with Hannah, his Jewish lover. They've weathered the storm. The Israelis have finally agreed to a ceasefire. The bombardments are over.

"Go on," Khalida at last has Bentham's full attention.

She glances at Fairfax and then bends to her notes. This passage, she believes, is key to where McGuigan finds himself. In the book, he and Hannah have found a brief moment of absolute peace. She's quoting direct.

"There are some things beyond love," she reads. "There are some places you can share where no one else has ever been. You've seen the worst, the absolute worst. You've seen what human beings can do to each other in the name of religion, or land, or blood ties, or the simple need to survive. You've witnessed the terrible

chemistry of high explosive, of white phosphorous. You've run out of ways of tallying how much damage we can do to each other, physical damage, damage inside, hidden damage, damage that won't show but that may still end up killing you. You're sort of on top of all that. Why? Because you've found a better place, you've found each other, and in that better place lies peace. The peace of trusting each other, of knowing each other, of realising that this thing you have will last and last and that no one can ever take it away." Khalida looks up. "My theory, sir, is that someone took it away."

"Took what away?"

"This peace he talks about. McGuigan thought he had that, sir. And now it's gone."

"How? Why?"

"We don't know. Because he won't tell us."

"But it has to do with this woman in his life? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes."

Bentham nods. He seems to understand. Then he looks at Fairfax.

"Steve?"

Fairfax is still hearing McGuigan's words from *Nakba* in his head. Two divorces ago, adrift in the wreckage of his first marriage, he'd met a woman who'd had a similar impact on him. He'd never felt anything like it in his life and he sensed he never would again. But then he'd lived with her, and married her, and finally lost her, ending up adrift again, no bearings, no sense of direction, no future, nothing.

"Khalida's right, sir. We're talking loss, grief, darkness. If you've never been there it's hard to describe."

"And McGuigan?"

"He's been there. He *is* there. And you know what? That makes Mr Sorenson a very lucky man."

Another knock at the door brings the WPC working with Taverner into the room. She slips him a couple of notes and leaves. Taverner scans both of them, then looks up.

“We’ve got good stills from the CCTV at the pub last night. McGuigan left at 21.13 with a middle aged couple he’d been talking to earlier. The pub is round the corner from Merrist House.”

Bentham wants to know where the stills are. One set is in the MIR. The other will be waiting for Fairfax at Paddington Green.

“Anything else, Andy?” Bentham nods at the other note.

“The Qataris have no record of issuing a passport to any Mohammed Zatoun.” Taverner smiles. “In their view it has to be a fake.”

Six

Fairfax and Khalida are back at Paddington Green by early afternoon. McGuigan has been given a take-out pizza but has chosen not to touch it. Now he studies Fairfax over the table in the interview room. Over the past ninety minutes he appears, in some strange way, to have physically shrunk. His shoulders are hunched. His eyes have lost their lustre, their sense of anticipation. He barely seems to register the presence of Khalida as she arrives late after making a couple of calls.

Back at the MIR, Bentham has insisted that Fairfax leads with the CCTV photos from the pub. This is hard evidence. These are people who McGuigan had been with just minutes before he climbed the stairs to murder Sorenson. He talks to them for ten minutes or so. Then he accompanies them into the street. Who are they? And where do they fit in *Palisade's* evolving narrative?

McGuigan gives them no more than a second or two of his attention. He appears unsurprised that his last twenty-four hours have been mapped in such detail.

"That's me," he agrees wearily.

"We know, Charlie. Who are the other people?"

"I've no idea. I went to the bar for a last pint and when I got back to the table there they were."

Fairfax knows this is true. He's seen the footage back at the MIR.

"Just strangers?"

"Yes."

"What did you talk about?"

"London, mostly. He was a distributor of some kind. She ran a gallery in Maine. They were here on business."

"They showed you a map at one point."

"That's right. They wanted to find their hotel."

"Can you remember the name?"

“The Chatsworth. It was just round the corner. I didn’t know why they couldn’t find it themselves.”

“So you took them there?”

“I did, yes. It was on my route.” He looks up. “I expect you’ve got photos of that, too.”

Fairfax leaves the interview room to make a brief call to the MIR. He manages to get hold of Bentham personally. He tells him about the Chatsworth and suggests officers take the CCTV shots with them. An American couple in their late forties, early fifties. Check the register. Swift them in for questioning.

Bentham wants to know whether McGuigan knows these people.

“He says not.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I do, sir, yes.”

Back in the interview room, the task is to try and wrestle some kind of account from McGuigan of exactly how he came to accept the mission to kill Sorenson: who did he meet on the West Bank? Who briefed him? Who funded him? How was this thing, in the most practical terms, supposed to work?

For this new challenge, Fairfax has the benefit of an intelligence file received within the last couple of hours from Tel Aviv. It carries the discreet logo of Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security service, and draws heavily on agents and informers on the West Bank. Some of these sources are Palestinians blackmailed into collaboration or simply paid for their services. Others are Israelis working openly at Shin Bet offices dotted across the territory. One of the names highlighted in this report is an Arab of Jordanian extraction called Mansour.

Fairfax tables the name the moment the interview starts. He wants to know when McGuigan first met him, and where that meeting took place. Both answers lie in the open Shin Bet file in front of him, a file Fairfax sees no point in concealing from McGuigan.

McGuigan at first says nothing. After several attempts to put the question different ways, Fairfax goes off-piste a little, asking him to describe a normal working

day in Nablus. Before lunch, he's already established that McGuigan has been employed by a Danish NGO. What exactly did he do?

McGuigan detects little menace in this invitation. To Fairfax' surprise, he talks easily about conflict resolution, about bearing witness, about trying to buffer countless client families from the sharper edges of the Occupation. This task, he tries to explain to Fairfax, is complicated by the fact that the West Bank is a polity divided against itself. Living under the Israelis is hard enough but warring factions amongst the local population – the Palestinian Authority, Al-Fatah, Hamas – make life even tougher. Most Palestinians, he says, simply want to get on with their lives. His task – and that of every other NGO – was to try and make that happen.

“Were there days you succeeded?”

“Yes. Not often, but yes.”

“But most days no?”

“Most days you inched along, did your best. We had a little money. That helped. We could buy food, clothing, stuff people really needed, especially in winter. Most Palestinians live on parsley and grain and fresh air. You'd be amazed.”

“So how do they get by?”

“They're resilient people. Most of them have faith.”

“In who? In what?”

“In Allah, obviously.”

“And in politicians?”

“Sometimes. If they trusted them.”

“Did they trust Hamas?”

“By and large, yes.”

“Did you?”

Fairfax has come full circle and McGuigan knows it. The elephant in the interview room is Mansour. Mansour, according to the Israelis, has affiliations to Hamas. He moves from address to address across the West Bank, a moving target difficult to pin down.

“You first met him in Ramallah, didn't you? We know the date. We even know the time. It was mid-morning. September 23rd. Am I right?”

McGuigan nods, says nothing. Fairfax taps the file.

"So, what happened?"

"We talked. I was there to discuss the reopening of a market that had been closed in Nablus. I thought he was a politician."

"With Hamas?"

"Yes. At street level they're very effective. They make a difference. They get things done."

"Did he solve your market problem?"

"He did."

"How?"

"He talked to a guy in the PA, that's the Palestinian Authority. He had a line to the Israelis. They were the ones who'd shut it down."

"Did you know this other guy?"

"No."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"But the market still opened?"

"Yes."

"And after that? You met Mansour again?"

McGuigan's eyes are on the file. He's tiring of this game.

"You know I met him again," he says. "A couple of weeks later. Different location."

"Nablus."

"That's right."

"Where you were living."

"Yes."

"So, he came to you?"

"In a way, yes."

"In a way? I don't understand."

"He made contact with me. Suggested we meet."

Fairfax checks the file. "This was early October. A month and a half ago."

"Yes."

"He had your contact details?"

“My phone number, yes.”

“What did he want?”

“He wanted to meet. He was staying at the house of a friend.”

“Did you ever meet this friend?”

“No.”

“Can you remember the address?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

McGuigan hesitates. Fairfax tears a sheet from his notepad and rolls a pen across the table towards him. McGuigan looks at it a moment and then scribbles a line and passes it back to Fairfax.

“This is in Arabic,” he says.

“I know. That’s the address Mansour gave me. That’s the way I remember it.”

“You speak Arabic? You know how to write it?”

“A little. Enough.” McGuigan nods at the address. “You’ll have to get it translated.”

“Sure. So what happened at this second meet? Was Mansour alone?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

“And were you?”

“Yes.” His smile is cold. “Very.”

“What does that mean?”

McGuigan doesn’t answer. Fairfax holds his gaze, feeling Khalida stirring beside him. We’re getting closer, he tells himself. This is where Charlie McGuigan runs out of road.

“You sat down with Mansour,” Fairfax suggests. “What next?”

“He told me about the Sorenson event in London. I knew already, of course.”

“Because you’d been invited?”

“Yes.”

“Did Mansour know that?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

"I don't know."

"Did you ask him?"

"No."

"So, what happened?"

"We talked about the West, about Sorenson. Palestinians have no time for Sorenson. They don't trust him."

"Why not?"

"They think he's in bed with the Zionists."

"And you? What do you think?"

"I know he's in bed with the Zionists. He could lean on the Americans any time he wanted. He could make life tough for Netanyahu over the settlements, over the water thefts, over all the other shit, but he doesn't. The Palestinians know this. That's why they have no time for the man."

"So how did the conversation with Mansour go?"

McGuigan looks from one face to the other.

"He wanted me to kill Sorenson."

"By wearing the vest?"

"Of course. Everything would be taken care of. All I had to do was fly to London, meet the old man from Hebron, and turn up at the meeting in the evening."

"And blow yourself up."

"Of course."

"No small thing."

"No."

"So, what did you say?"

"I told him I'd think about it."

"You needed time?"

"I did."

"For what?"

"I had to make some calls."

"Plural?"

A moment's hesitation. Then a nod of the head.

"Yes."

“To who?”

“To people who mattered.”

“Like?”

McGuigan turns away, refusing to take the conversation any further. Khalida presses him harder.

“Someone in particular?”

“No comment.”

“Did you get through?”

“No comment.”

“Did you get the response you wanted?”

“No comment.”

“So, what was the outcome? What did you decide?”

“I decided to go to London.”

“To end your life?”

“To kill Sorenson.”

“Same thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

Neither Khalida nor Fairfax says a word. The enormity of this man’s decision is all too evident. At length he slumps in his chair, a reluctant survivor warming his hands on the embers of his life.

“Strangely, it wasn’t dying that ever bothered me,” he says after a while. “I was way beyond that. It was the rest of it I couldn’t cope with.”

“And now?”

“Nothing’s changed.”

Seven

Fairfax confers with Bentham on the phone from Paddington Green.

Bentham appears to have calmed down. In a rare moment of near-intimacy, he confides that the direct political pressure is off. The Commander, the overall boss of Counter Terrorism Command, has stepped in between himself and the shock troops from the Cabinet Office. At least for now he can concentrate on the fucking job.

Fairfax tells him about Mansour. He's already scanned and sent the address in Nablus to Andy Taverner at the MIR and strongly suggests that someone on the ground on the West Bank checks it out.

"Why?"

"We need to be sure it exists."

"But it was in the Israelis' file. We know it exists. McGuigan confirms it. Why take a second look?"

This, to Fairfax, is an inane question. Never take anything at face value. Especially in the Middle East.

After a brief silence, Bentham appears to agree. He'll put a call in, make it happen. In the meantime, he has some news about the American couple at the Chatsworth Hotel.

"They don't exist, Steve. They never booked in. No one's ever seen them."

Fairfax says nothing. Think this thing through, he tells himself, and the news comes as no surprise. Chance meeting in a pub? No fucking way.

"What about the nicked phone?"

"Nothing. So far. We've talked to Vodafone, though, and they've taken it off the blacklist. The thing's working again. Let's hope the guy hasn't bought another SIM card. Let's hope he starts making calls."

Phone mapping has become an easy win in crime investigation. Leave your mobile switched on, and it tells the world exactly where you are. Fairfax has already confirmed that McGuigan has been using this same phone for more than a year,

leaving his e-spoor across the West Bank. He shares this thought with Bentham. Presumably Vodafone have a network out there?

“They do, Steve.”

“And are we checking with them? Billing history? All that bollocks?”

“We are. The request went in this morning.”

“Where to?”

“Their Tel Aviv office.”

Back in the interview room, Khalida is in the driving seat. She thinks she understands exactly what lay behind McGuigan’s decision to end his life and she’s determined to tease it out of him. Fairfax, who agrees with her analysis, is happy to let her try.

Less than an hour ago, the MIR received a long e-mail from a Danish academic called Kornelius Henningson who’d spent a year running the Nablus office of the NGO for which McGuigan had worked. The e-mail has come in via MI6, who’d initiated overnight enquiries with the Danish NGO.

McGuigan is looking a little brighter and seems amused to see yet more of his life laid out in black and white across the table. For an alleged loner, thinks Fairfax, he seems to have made a peace with all this detailed attention.

The e-mail runs to five A-4 pages. Khalida flicks from page to page in no hurry to frame the first question, then returns to the beginning of the document. A name is ringed in red. She looks up.

“Tell me about Sapir, Charlie,” she says.

McGuigan stares at her. For some reason this is a development he hasn’t anticipated. His first instinct is to shake his head.

“No,” he says.

“No, what? No, you’ve never heard of her? No, you don’t want to talk about her?”

“Just no.”

“OK.” She smiles at him. “Just help me out here. Who exactly was she?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“That’s your opinion, Charlie. It doesn’t happen to be ours. Just trust us for once. We’re here to help you.”

“*Help* me? How?”

“By building the big picture.”

“You’ve got the big picture. I tried to kill Sorenson and failed. End of. Charge me. Try me. Bang me up. Yeah? Will you do that?”

Khalida doesn’t answer. Instead she asks about Kornelius Henningson.

“You knew this guy, am I right?”

“He employed me.”

“Sure. And he liked you, too. In fact, he liked both of you.”

“Both?”

“You and Sapir.” She ducks her head and reads from the file. “*Charlie was hooked up with an Israeli activist, a woman called Sapir Dahan. She was a force of nature, this girl, and a bit of a legend on the West Bank. No one ever stood in her way. No one ever stopped her. She did what she did and she knew no fear. Certain kinds of men found her irresistible and one of them was Charlie. He was crazy about her. He was a puppy. It was nice to see.*” Khalida looks up. “Nuts about her?”

“No comment.”

“This is a guy who employed you, Charlie. He would have seen you every working day of your life. Sapir, too, I expect. He *knew*, Charlie. He knew how important she became.” She pauses, glanced down again. “Amazing English this guy has.”

“He’s a Dane. They speak every language in the book. His Arabic was perfect.”

“But is he lying? Or were you really crazy about this...” she frowns, “...Sapir?”

McGuigan shrugs, turns his head away, won’t answer. Fairfax makes no attempt to break the silence.

Khalida leafs on through the e-mail and then pauses again, her finger anchored in the text.

“You went to Gaza in December 2008. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“With Sapir?”

“No comment.”

“I think yes.” She bends to the e-mail, starts to read again. *“The pair of them went down to Gaza ahead of what became Cast Lead. Charlie sent me e-mails when the Israelis started shelling and bombing the place. I admired their courage. That’s a gutsy thing to do. That shows a real commitment. When I replied I told them they should be proud of themselves.”* She looks up. “They, Charlie. You and Sapir.”

“No comment.”

“Are you trying to protect her in some way?”

“No comment.”

“Are you denying you had a relationship?”

“No comment.”

“Then it must be true, mustn’t it? Hannah was Sapir. Sapir was Hannah. And you know the only question that really matters?”

“Tell me.”

“What matters is what happened afterwards.”

McGuigan at last nods, a gesture Fairfax interprets as agreement. Khalida is holding his gaze.

“So, you’d left the Gaza Strip. You’d survived the worst the Israelis could throw at these people. And now you were back on the West Bank. Am I right?”

Another nod, more cautious.

“The pair of you.”

“I was living alone.”

“Sure. Henningson confirms that. But you were in love with this woman. She meant everything to you. She was there in Nablus. You saw her every day. You had a relationship. She *mattered* to you. Isn’t that the way it was?”

“No comment.”

“But you spent the next six years with her, Charlie. It’s down here in Henningson’s account. This guy wasn’t just your employer, he was a friend. More than that he was an admirer, a fan. He looked out for you. He wanted the best for you. For both of you.”

“He went back to Copenhagen after that first year.”

“You’re right. But you kept in touch, didn’t you? By e-mail. Maybe by phone as well. Skype. Whatever.”

“He knows nothing.”

“He knows everything, Charlie. And more importantly, believe it or not, he cares about you. Which I guess is why he’s gone to so much trouble on your behalf.”

“Trouble?”

Khalida flicks through to the final page of the e-mail. *“Charlie McGuigan is one of the finest and most dedicated NGOs I’ve ever had the privilege of working with. But he’s also extremely sensitive, maybe even vulnerable, which I guess goes with the territory if you happen to be a writer. Either way, Sapir was his whole life, which may explain a great deal.”* Khalida looks up. “Was your whole life, Charlie. So what happened?”

MgGuigan lowers his head. Then his shoulders begin to shake. His solicitor enfolds him in her arms. He’s sobbing now, his face buried in her chest.

Fairfax watches him for a moment, then checks his watch.

“Interview terminated at 14.56,” he announces, reaching for the cassette machine.

Eight

Another phone conference with *Palisade's* SIO. Fairfax, who doesn't do dramatic, finds it hard to keep the excitement out of his voice. He tells Bentham about Sapir. We need to bottom out this woman, he says. We need to be talking to the Israelis again. Why hasn't she figured in the stuff they've sent over?

"She has, Steve."

"When?"

"A couple of hours ago. The file went to Langley by mistake. They had the courtesy to fire it on to us. Turns out she was on the Yank radar already. Serious activist. Mega high-profile. Pain in the arse as far as the Israelis were concerned."

"And they agree? The Israelis?"

"Big time. They've given us chapter and verse. She's been out on the West Bank since 2002. Reading between the lines, she's constantly in their hair. Demos at checkpoints. Protests over house demolitions. Mass sit-ins round the olive orchards. Marches along the wall. In the end you get the feeling they got tired of arresting her. It's a good read. I'm sending it over."

Fairfax nods to himself. *A woman who knows no fear*. No wonder McGuigan fell for her. No wonder she ended up in a best-selling novel. A puppy indeed.

"You've got a picture of her?"

"Pictures plural. Take your choice."

"And?"

"She's a stunner. If you like them small and pretty and perfectly formed."

"So where is she now?"

"No one seems to know."

"You're telling me she's disappeared?"

"I'm telling you even the Israelis don't know."

"How can you be sure?"

“I asked them on the phone a couple of minutes ago. My oppo at the top of Shin Bet. She hasn’t been around for a week or so. I got the impression he was relieved.” A bark of laughter. “Try Mr McGuigan. You never know your luck.”

Fairfax does just that. Or, to be more precise, he asks Khalida to put the question. McGuigan appears to have recovered. He even apologises for what he calls his “theatrics”.

“We understand, Charlie,” she assures him. “We really do.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” She pauses. “So where is Sapir now?”

“I don’t know.”

“But she left you?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“A couple of months ago. Back in September.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“She never told you?”

“No.”

“You were living together?”

“More or less. She had her place, I had mine, but, you know...”

“And she just walked out? No explanation? No reason that you could understand?”

“None.”

“So how did you feel?”

“No fucking comment.”

“I bet.” Khalida pauses, extends her hand across the table. McGuigan looks at it, doesn’t move. Then his head comes up again.

“There was another man,” he says quietly. “A guy called Hazeem. They had a relationship. She was his mistress, I suppose. The guy was a big figure on the West Bank, fingers in all kinds of pies. He was a businessman. Big family. Wife. Lots of kids. He lived in a huge villa outside Ramallah, but he had properties abroad, too.

Some people say he had a place in Tel Aviv, but I can't be sure. What I do know about is his apartment in Kensington. If Sapir and I happened to be in London at the same time, which didn't happen often, we'd meet there. She had the key to the place. Hazeem is Mr Bling. Marble floors. Gold taps in the bathroom. The whole *schtick*. We'd spend the afternoon fucking each other stupid in his four-poster bed. You've no idea how sweet that felt."

"And this relationship was ongoing? Sapir and Hazeem?"

"Since before I met her. It was a part of her life that had nothing to do with me."

"Except it hurt."

"Of course, it did. But she was untameable."

Untameable. Fairfax writes himself a note. Sapir Dahan. The wild beast of the West Bank. Part circus act. Part *femme fatale*. Part saint.

Khalida wants to know more about the end of the relationship.

"Do you blame Hazeem for her walking out? Did she dump you for him?"

"No."

"You're sure about that?"

"Absolutely. Hazeem was killed by the Hamas people. They'd never liked him."

Fairfax nods. The name has rung a bell.

"This year? September time?"

"August."

"And was Sapir upset?"

"Of course."

"But that's not why she left you?" Khalida again.

"I don't think so. She never had the whole of him, and she didn't want it, either. At least that's what she told me."

"Did you believe her?"

"I had to believe her. I had no choice."

"Why not?"

"You don't understand. This was a relationship on her terms. From start to finish she made the running. Her rules. Her call."

"How did that make you feel?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes, please."

"Very happy."

"Why?"

"Because there were some parts of her I knew I could never have."

"They were off-limits?"

"Yes." He holds her gaze. "She had mystery in her soul. Deep, deep shadows. She always felt dangerous. Always. And that was a turn-on. Do you know what I mean?"

Khalida nods, then leans slightly forward.

"You really don't know where she is?"

"No. Yesterday she told me she was at her father's place up in Haifa. It turned out to be a lie."

"Father's place?"

"His name's Danny. I'll give you the number."

"But you talked to her? Yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted to say goodbye. I'm not sure she really believed me."

"Believed what?"

"That I was going to go through with this thing."

"You're telling me she knew? She knew what you were going to do?"

Khalida is staring at him.

"Of course, she did. I'd told her already. I'd warned her. She knew everything."

Fairfax glances at Khalida, wondering if she's caught the real implications here. He needn't have worried.

"Was this some kind of gesture then?" Khalida asks. "Threatening to blow yourself up? Threatening to kill Sorenson?"

"It wasn't a threat. I meant it."

"Because Mansour asked you?"

“Yes.”

“And she knew that?”

“Yes.”

“And if she’d said everything would be fine, that you’d sort things out between you, that you’d get together again... what then?”

McGuigan’s head comes up. His eyes are shiny with tears.

“Then everything would have been different.”

“Different how?”

He doesn’t answer. Just stares at her.

“Different how, Charlie?”

“We wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t even be in London.”

“No Mr Sorenson?”

“No.”

“No suicide vest?”

“No.”

“And Sapir knew that? You really told her?”

“She did.” He nods. “You know what she once said to me? Back on the West Bank?”

Khalida shakes her head, gestures for him to carry on. He looks at her for a long moment, then his eyes find Fairfax.

“Never waste your own death,” he whispers. “Because it’s the only one you’ve got.”

Nine

Bentham calls a full squad meeting for six o'clock at the MIR. Fairfax and Khalida drive across to Invictus House in the later afternoon. Fairfax has already passed on the intelligence about Hazeem, the Palestinian businessman who'd taken Sapir as a mistress, with the strong recommendation that this lead be developed quick-time, but another session with McGuigan had hit the buffers after they'd pressed him for more information about Sapir.

At this point, McGuigan had requested a break to talk to his solicitor. Minutes later, she'd returned to announce that her client would be answering no further questions. She'd also said that, in her opinion, he was suffering from physical and mental exhaustion, a condition – she implied – that could easily trigger a complete collapse. Looking at McGuigan's face across the table, pale, drawn, defeated, Fairfax was inclined to agree.

The Major Incident Room is full to bursting when Fairfax and Khalida arrive, and a small army of detectives are leafing through the pile of newspapers on a table by the door. The media witchhunt has drawn a bead on the obvious target – Hamas – and McGuigan is portrayed in paper after paper as the willing tool of the ruthless jihadists determined to take their holy war to the capitals of the West. Photos of McGuigan arriving at Paddington Green have featured worldwide as media outlets struggle to keep abreast of the breaking story, a development – in Bentham's view – that will do his e-sales no harm at all.

In Tel Aviv meanwhile Netanyahu has called yet another press conference to destroy any idea that Hamas could ever be regarded as partners for peace. These people are determined to destroy us, he roars. And their reach is much longer than anyone imagined. As for Hamas, they have so far issued a single, one-paragraph press statement categorically denying any responsibility for either McGuigan or the botched attack on Sorenson. This, to the media's glee, has triggered an unprecedented Twitter storm. Hamas, it turns out, has 3.7 million followers, most of them in Indonesia.

The Commander arrives in the MIR with minutes to spare. He's a bluff, companionable Scot, recently knighted, with a fine record in previous high-profile jobs of keeping the peace between warring communities. He knows his way around Whitehall and Westminster, which is just as well, and normally has no problem putting politicians back in their box.

On this occasion, though, Fairfax senses that the man is in trouble. His opening remarks are uncharacteristically muted. He wants the men and women in this room to know that they have his unwavering support, but he also admits that *Palisade's* time horizons are shrinking by the hour. We have to get this thing wrapped up, he says. To everyone's satisfaction.

Fairfax is only too aware of the contradictions at the heart of this clumsy appeal. The politicians want a result. The media are howling for blood. There's even editorial talk of bringing back the death penalty for the likes of Charlie McGuigan. Fairfax is quietly amused by nonsense like this but understands that the media likes nothing better than fuelling days of growing public hysteria.

The Commander has finished and now *Palisade's* SIO is offering an overview of the investigation to date, tallying the key leads. The missing security guard. The mystery tip-off from the American on the phone to Merrist House. Lingering doubts about the viability of the suicide vest. The whereabouts of McGuigan's stolen smart phone. The provenance of the bombmaker. The mystery American couple in the Mayfair pub. The role played by a prominent West Bank businessman. And – absolutely key to the enquiry – McGuigan himself. Bentham looks for Fairfax amongst the sea of faces. Finds him.

“Steve?”

This is deeply unwelcome. Earlier, Bentham has implied that he wants to handle McGuigan himself and Fairfax has briefed him accordingly. Now he's demanding an account from the front line, clues to what might be going on in McGuigan's head.

“He's coughed, sir. That's the first thing. He admits that he wanted to kill Sorenson and he regrets that he fucked up.”

An exchange of glances around the room. Low murmurs of surprise. If this is true, why hasn't the guy been charged?

Bentham wants to know about McGuigan's motivation. What drives a man to take his own life?

"This is trickier, sir. He's passionate about the Palestinians, about the cause. We can evidence that from the interviews, and in the stuff he's published. He thinks the Israelis are arseholes and he hasn't got much time for ex-politicians like Sorenson but it's also more personal than that."

He explains about the six-year relationship with Sapir. This is an Israeli woman, as driven and passionate as McGuigan himself. Recently she's left him, triggering an earthquake in his private life.

"The guy's all over the place," Fairfax says. "In my opinion he was a basket case from the moment she dumped him, but he had one thing asset left. An invite to the Sorenson get-together."

"And Hamas took advantage?"

"McGuigan hooked up with a guy called Mansour. Mansour recruited him, turned him into a martyr. I don't think McGuigan believes he was part of God's plan because he doesn't appear to believe in God, but he was happy to wear the vest and do the biz."

"Because of the woman? Or the cause?"

"They may be the same thing, sir. That's my best guess."

"Right," Bentham spreads his hands wide. "Anyone got anything to say?"

A D/C near the water cooler raises his hand.

"How much do we know about Mansour?" he asks.

"Good question. Andy?"

Andy Taverner is the keeper of *Palisade's* secrets. With his usual concision, he summarises the intelligence to date. Jordanian Arab. Known links to Hamas. Always on the move. Allegedly has the ear of Khalid Mishal.

"Says who?" The D/C again.

"The Israelis."

"And Hamas?"

"They're denying everything. As well they might."

A rumble of laughter goes round the room. The politics of the Middle East are beyond complex. Never believe a word anyone says.

“What about the tip-off to the people at Merrist House?” This same D/C, addressing his question to Bentham. “The American guy on the phone? Where did that come from?”

“We still don’t know. The CIA say they’ve no idea.”

“Just a lucky break then, sir?”

“Obviously not.”

The Commander intervenes. He wants to know where *Palisade* should be heading next.

The SIO ducks the question, hands it to Fairfax. Fairfax, for a brief second, wonders how candid he should be. Then he shrugs. What the fuck.

“In my view, sir, we need to know a great deal more about Mansour, about the bombmaker, and most of all about the woman, Sapir. McGuigan says he spoke to her yesterday on the phone but hasn’t a clue where she is. Her number has now been disconnected. The Israelis say they’ve lost her. We’re trying to make contact with her father but so far he’s not picking up on either of the numbers we’ve got. Beyond that, in my opinion, the key to this whole thing is the word.”

“The word?”

“The word McGuigan needed to use to trigger the bomb. To date, it’s the one thing we can’t get out of him. If we know the word, we’ll know whether the device would have worked or not. And that would tell us a very great deal.”

“Really?”

Fairfax nods, says nothing, knowing that already he’s probably gone too far. To everyone’s slight surprise, the meeting is over within minutes. Bentham intercepts Fairfax as he and Khalida are heading for the door.

“My office,” he grunts. “Now.”

Just the three of them in Bentham’s office: Bentham, the Commander, and Fairfax. The Commander, true to form, is trying to keep the peace.

“High profile interviews can be knacker,” he tells Fairfax. “Maybe it’s time you and the lady took a break.”

“Her name’s Khalida, sir,” Fairfax says. “And we’re both still up for it, thank you.”

“You’re not hearing me, Steve. For the sake of the enquiry, it might be wise to have a second point of view.”

“That’s your call, sir, obviously.”

“Ross?” The Commander turns to Bentham.

Bentham is on the point of agreeing but one look at Fairfax’ face appears to change his mind.

“I think we need to be clear, sir, about what – exactly – Steve has in mind. Steve?”

“Nothing, sir. Except this thing isn’t anywhere near bottomed-out. We’ve made a start but there’s still some way to go.”

Bentham is about to explore this further but the Commander cuts in.

“I agree, Steve. Of course I agree. But we have to be clear about our role here. We’re tasked to find out whether McGuigan intended to kill Sorenson. By his own admission, he did. That’s where it should end, surely?”

“What about the rest of it, sir? The bigger picture?”

“Not our job, Steve. Of course, the rest is germane but we’re coppers, not spooks.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to think very hard about charging him.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

Fairfax holds his gaze. A decision to charge will end the possibility of any further interviews.

“Is that an order, sir?”

The Commander hesitates. Fairfax knows that this man never wants to be held responsible for cutting off an enquiry in its prime, certainly not something as high-profile and sensitive as this. On the other hand he clearly has pressures of his own to contend with.

Fairfax is looking at Bentham. As SIO, his voice should be the loudest.

“Sir?” Fairfax asks.

Bentham checks his watch. Frowns. *Palisade* still has the best part of two weeks before they have to charge McGuigan or let him go. At length, he glances at the Commander then turns back to Fairfax.

“I suggest you get things wrapped by tomorrow night, Steve. Do I hear a yes?”

Fairfax nods, says nothing. The meeting is plainly over.

Ten

Fairfax lies in bed at home. He and Trish have retired early. He badly wanted to share the day with her, but he knows he can't. McGuigan's face is everywhere, all over *Newsnight*, all over the other feeds. Trish has picked up the *London Evening Standard* on her way back from work. Above a close-up of McGuigan, the headline reads *Is this the Face of Evil?*

Fairfax broods. Last night, with the Commander stepping into his armoured Range Rover in the basement garage, he and Bentham had ridden the express lift back to the seventh floor where word had just come in from the British embassy in Tel Aviv. A mid-level diplomat had been despatched to Nablus to check the address where McGuigan had met Mansour. It turns out the Israelis had just finished bulldozing it, an act of punishment, in their phrase, to teach Hamas yet another lesson.

Bentham had absorbed the news without comment. Moments later, opening his office door for Fairfax to leave, he'd extended a hand.

"Tomorrow, close of play, Steve," he'd repeated. "It's the best I can do."

Replaying the scene in his head, Fairfax understands exactly what his embarrassed SIO was saying. Earlier, when Fairfax had asked about progress on the CCTV stills from the pub where McGuigan had shared a table with the American couple, Bentham had hinted at problems with MI6. He'd heard a whisper that they'd got firm IDs on both individuals, yet nothing had come through. Were they being dicked around by the spooks along the river? And if so, why? Bentham didn't know the answer to either question but the fact that he even had to ask suggested *Palisade* was in deep shit. All the politicians wanted was McGuigan in the dock. The rest could wait.

Trish stirs. Fairfax finds her hand in the darkness, lifts it to his lips, kisses it softly. This evening, before stepping out into the smoky dusk, he'd taken the precaution of removing prints of the pub CCTV from the MIR and slipping them into

his briefcase. A couple of years ago, long before he met Trish, he'd had an affair with an MI6 analyst called Muna. She came out of the same box as Khalida – attractive, passionate, clever, fiercely independent – and the relationship had only come to an end because neither of them was really prepared to commit. They'd enjoyed each other's company, though, and had since met for the odd drink.

Muna had high-flyer written all over her. Even three years ago, her level of access was impressive. Tomorrow, first thing, he'd give her a bell. Maybe she'd agree. Maybe, with that trademark smile of regret, she'd say no. Either way, he knew he owed it to McGuigan to try.

Eleven

Muna says yes to the invite, an early coffee at a Costa in the depths of Kennington. Getting up from the table to give her a hug and a kiss, Fairfax knows that their brief conversation on the phone has intrigued her.

He fetches a skinny latte from the counter. This is a woman who never eats.

“You’re on *Palisade*,” she says at once. “You have to be.”

“Yes.”

“Interviewing? Marquee role?”

“Yes.”

“My clever, clever man.” She leans across the table and kisses him again.

She loves the taste, the smell, the feel of success.

“So, how’s it going? Am I allowed to ask?”

“It’s going OK.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m not going to tell you. Not here. Not yet.”

“But soon? When it’s all over?”

“My pleasure.”

He means it. This was a relationship he never expected and in a way he doesn’t miss. They enjoyed each other for a while and – to his immense relief – nothing seems to have changed.

He asks her where she currently sits in the organisation. Far East desk, she says. And yes, I’ve fallen in love with Hong Kong.

“How about the Middle East?”

“The graveyard of dreams. Total snakepit. Everyone wanting a piece of you. Give me Hong Kong any day.”

Fairfax feigns disappointment. Muna bends towards him again. She doesn’t want this encounter to end, not without making her ex-man happy.

“What are you after?”

“Is that a serious question?”

“The only kind, my sweet one.” Her hand closes on his. “All you ever have to do is ask nicely.”

Fairfax grins, something that doesn't happen very often. He pulls out a brown manilla envelope from his briefcase and leaves it on the table.

“Six shots,” he says. “Two blow-ups, head and shoulders. Surprisingly good res. I need names. Please.”

Muna makes no move to open the envelope. Instead, she's holding Fairfax' gaze.

“This is *Palisade*?”

“Of course, it is.”

“And we're sitting on these photos already?”

“You are.”

“What's the location?”

“A pub in Mayfair. The Feathers.”

“That's round the corner from Merrist House.”

“You're right.”

“And you need the IDs quick-time?”

“I do.”

“When by?”

“Noon. Today.”

Her eyes widen, mock disbelief, but Fairfax knows she's kidding. She's probably got the names already, he thinks. We could probably step out onto the pavement and do the biz there and then. But that's not the way this woman works. She always made me wait, he remembers. Always.

He knows this little piece of theatre needs one last twist. All he has to do is ask the courtesy question. No problem.

“Are you sure this is OK? No great drama?”

She studies him for a moment over the rim of her mug, then beckons him closer.

“I'm fucking a young guy on the Middle Eastern desk,” she whispers. “And he's nearly as good as you were.”

Twelve

Back at Paddington Green, McGuigan has had a good night's sleep. To keep things sweet, Fairfax and Khalida briefly conference with his solicitor. Alice Devereux has just shared a polystyrene cup of machine-brewed tea with her client and is confident that he's up for another interview. When Fairfax indicates that he'd like to find out more about Danny Dahan she doesn't think that will be a problem. She and McGuigan have talked about Sapir's father and she has the impression that they'd become friends. As Fairfax and Khalida are leaving the office, she calls them back.

"Charlie has indicated that he'd like to talk about the Pilgerhaus."

"The what?"

"The Pilgerhaus. Don't ask me what it is because I haven't a clue. I'm the messenger here. See where it takes us."

"Us" intrigues Fairfax. In the wake of McGuigan's confession, yesterday seems to have cemented a strange bond in the interview room. In the wild, Charlie McGuigan would have been dragged down and torn to pieces long ago. Here, facing the certainty of a long prison sentence, all three of them seem to have linked hands to cushion his fall.

"I'm obliged." Fairfax offers Alice a nod of thanks.

"My pleasure. I suspect he's in the mood to talk."

And he is. With little prompting, he opens up about Danny Dahan. He's only met Sapir's dad twice, both times in Jerusalem, but he liked the man on sight. Unsurprisingly, he has his daughter's spontaneity, her unswerving sense of direction, her absolute commitment to a cause she believes in.

"Which is? In his case?"

"His homeland. Israel. He emigrated to Israel from the US the year before the Six Day War. He'd been in the Marine Corps and he'd just come out of Vietnam. The IDF grabbed him, as you might imagine."

He describes the afternoon the two men spent together in the Old City after visiting Yad Vashem, with Danny reliving moments in the long-ago battle to liberate East Jerusalem. He'd killed Jordanian soldiers that day, spilled Arab blood, lots of it, but as well he'd been wise enough to recognise that a peace was possible, if only the politicians had the vision to seize it.

"They didn't," Fairfax points out.

"Of course, they didn't. And I guess that was the moment it all went wrong. Grab the first hilltop, build the first settlement, and the next fifty years write themselves. But you know the thing about Danny? About Sapir? They never give up. Never. Whatever the odds, whatever the opposition, they're in there, fighting."

Fairfax wants to know more about Danny. In '67, he must have been in his early twenties. How old is he now?

"73."

"Fit? Healthy?"

"Pissed off."

McGuigan tells Fairfax about his horse-riding accident in the Golan Heights. A bad break. Months of traction. Mainly at home.

"This is recently?"

"A couple of years ago. Sapir went back home to look after him."

"Did you ever make it up there, too?"

"Never. It was madness in Nablus. You're working all hours."

"Not even the odd weekend?"

"No, we both agreed it wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

I just told you. And Sapir wasn't keen, either. She said that we belonged on the West Bank. I was happy with that."

"But you missed her?"

"All the time. It was like losing a limb. I knew exactly how Danny must have felt."

Fairfax nods, resisting the temptation to write himself a note. The tone of the exchange has been easy, two mates sharing a conversation, and that's the way

he wants it to stay. Nevertheless, the shape of this strange relationship is becoming ever more clear. Sapir's call. Always.

Khalida, like Fairfax, has yet to open her file.

"Tell me about the Pilgerhaus," she says.

McGuigan, for the briefest moment, lights up.

"Alice mentioned it?"

"She did."

He pats his solicitor's arm, a gesture of gratitude. The Pilgerhaus, he explains, was one of the last times he truly shared with Sapir. She was yet to leave him and there was absolutely no indication that this would ever happen, but they were both knackered and due for a break.

"So where is this place?"

"On the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum. It's run by a bunch of German Catholics. You're talking serious peace. I can't do justice to the experience, how quiet it is, how serene. It talks to your soul. It makes you friends with yourself. We were there for nearly a week. It felt like a lifeline. I could live there forever. We said we both could."

"This is some kind of hotel?"

"A retreat. With views. And the wind off the lake. And amazing bird life."

"But you pay?"

"Of course. And it's not cheap."

"How much?"

"Around £140 a night, half board."

Khalida scribbles down the figure. Does the math. Looks up.

"That's nearly a thousand pounds."

"That's right."

"So, who paid?"

"I've no idea. Sapir had spent a summer working there but that was years ago. She might have got some kind of discount but no way would they have waived the lot."

"You're telling me she had private money?"

“Not to my knowledge. We were always skint. That was part of the deal, really. Rich in the smallness of our wants.”

“Very Palestinian.”

“You’re right.”

Khalida is studying him, trying to work it out, trying to figure where this sudden windfall fits in Charlie McGuigan’s story.

“Do you think it was the businessman, Hazeem?” she asks. “Do you think he picked up the bill?”

“Highly unlikely.”

“How come?”

“He was dead by then. Hamas had killed him. In any case, Sapir would never have taken a shekel from him, out of sheer pride.”

“You know that?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“She told me.”

“And you believed her?”

“Yes.”

“So where did the money come from? Her father?”

“I doubt it. Sapir was independence on legs. Same principle.”

Fairfax nods. *Was*. Interesting.

“So how soon after this trip did she leave you?” Still Khalida.

“About a week.”

“Do you think going to the Pilgerhaus was some kind of goodbye? In her head?”

“I don’t know. I suppose it might have been. I’m sure there were a million things she never told me.”

“Secrets, you mean? Didn’t that bother you?”

“Not at all. Like I told you before, I found it a bit of a turn-on.”

“Do you think she ever lied to you?”

“No. We’re talking sins of omission here. Stuff she just chose not to share.”

“And that was OK?”

“Yes. I had the best part of her. That I knew for sure. What she did with the rest was her call, her business.”

Khalida nods. Reflects. Looks up again.

“You started the book – *Nakba* – after she left you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I had to keep myself sane. And if I sent it to her I thought it might bring her back.”

“Did she ever read it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You never asked her?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I couldn’t bear to think that she hadn’t.”

“So best not to ask?”

“Exactly.”

“And afterwards? After you’d finished writing the book, sent it off, self-published it, whatever you have to do... was that when you went to see Mansour?”

“Yes.”

“And let me be clear about this, the invitation came from him?”

“Yes.”

“Had you had *any* contact with Sapir in between?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about that. You met? We’re talking face-to-face?”

“Never. It was always on the phone.”

“Long conversations?”

“No. To be honest, it was like talking to a stranger. It was as if nothing had ever happened between us. Not in Nablus. None of the stuff we’d been through in Gaza. It was...” he blinked, “...weird. Weird and worse than weird.”

“It upset you?”

“Of course, it upset me. A couple of times I broke down. There, on the phone. That didn’t help, of course.”

“She didn’t say anything? Didn’t sympathise at all?”

“No. Not that I deserved sympathy. Crying like a baby.”

Khalida nods. “And then you had the meeting with Mansour?”

“Yes.”

“And agreed to go to London?”

“Yes.”

“I think I understand.”

“You do?” McGuigan is staring at her. “What do you understand?”

Khalida doesn’t reply. Instead she looks sideways at Fairfax. Help me. Please.

Fairfax asks McGuigan whether he wants to take a break. He shakes his head. No thank you.

“Fine. There’s one last thing we need to know, Charlie. You’re not going to like this. In fact you’re going to hate it.”

“Try me.”

“We need to know the word you were going to use to trigger the vest.”

McGuigan shakes his head again. No way.

Fairfax tries to re-frame the proposition. As a detective, he’s working as part of a large team investigating what happened last night. Other agencies are involved. Hundreds of individuals picking over the small print of the story Charlie’s been sharing. And now there are suspicions that things might not be quite the way they appear.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not surprised. But listen to me, Charlie. At the moment you are heading for a very big chunk of your life behind bars. I’m not sure how much you know about prisons in this country but just now they’re very bad places to be. Staff cuts. Violence. Shit food. Banged up in your cell 23 hours a day because there’s no one with the time to make life better for you. Don’t get me wrong here. I’m not offering you any kind of deal. I’m not the wizard who can magic the last couple of days away. What you’ve done is huge, huge beyond contemplation. Thank God you didn’t kill

anyone but that's what you set out to do and intention, believe me, is nine tenths of the law. So have a think, Charlie. Time is short."

"A think about what?"

"The word. Giving it to us. Sharing it with us."

"I can't. I won't."

"*Can't?*"

"It's the one thing I've got left. You're telling me you don't understand that?"

"I'm telling you we might be able to help you. If only you give me your word."

"Nice. Give you my word. I like irony. I like that."

He holds Fairfax' gaze. Then shakes his head again.

Khalida clears her throat, leans forward across the table, takes Charlie's hand in hers.

"We do understand, Charlie," he says softly. "Believe it or not."

Fairfax, at Khalida's request, calls a break. They go to a nearby office.

Khalida shuts the door. Turns to Fairfax.

"You've got it, haven't you?"

"Tell me."

"He's shit scared we'll test the thing and it won't work. He's terrified the guys at Tower House will try the word and nothing will happen. Because then everything he's assumed, everything he's been through, will be absolutely pointless, null and void, wasted, gone. Nothing will make sense anymore. Black will be white, white black. This is a sentence of death, Steve. He'll top himself within the week, I guarantee it."

"And Sapir?"

"Don't even go there." She stares at him, hugging herself as if the room has suddenly iced. "Jesus Christ, Steve. What have we done?"

The call from Muna at MI6 comes within the hour. Fairfax and Khalida are back in the interview room. At Fairfax' insistence, they're still trying to prise the word out of McGuigan but as Khalida knows it remains his one lifeline, the last remaining brick in his wall. No chance. No comment. No fucking way.

Fairfax leaves the interview room to take the call. Muna keeps it brief. Fairfax can hear traffic in the background, the clatter of a helicopter. God knows where she is.

“Well?” Fairfax says.

“They’re both Israeli. Both Mossad.”

“You’re certain?”

“Silly question.”

The phone goes dead. The call to Merrist House, Fairfax thinks. The Mayfair phone box. The American voice.

Khalida is right. Jesus Christ.

Thirteen

Both Fairfax and Khalida are ordered back to the MIR after lunch. To everyone's surprise, except perhaps Fairfax, *Palisade's* SIO has cleared his desk and gone. In his place is another Det-Supt, an officer of Pakistani extraction called Arik Bhatti.

In certain quarters, amongst people in the know, Bhatti has become a bad smell in the Met. Ambition was never an issue in any force, and neither is the kind of brutal directness that has become Bhatti's MO. But the man is a bully, famous for reducing his underlings to tears, and he seems to have an almost autistic disregard for the fear and loathing he inspires. His nickname, voiced quietly behind his back, is "Bacon".

Fairfax stands in front of his desk. Chairs are available but there's no invitation to sit down. Already, Fairfax feels like a prisoner.

"You'll know I've taken over from Mr Bentham," Bhatti grunts. "I understand he gave you until tonight to charge McGuigan."

"That's right, sir."

"So, how's it going?"

"It isn't, sir."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we've spent most of the day trying to get him to part with the word that might trigger the vest. He won't do it."

"Shame." Bhatti sounds less than sorry. He glances at his watch. "Do me a favour, yeah? Get back there and charge him now."

"Now?"

"Now. This is a waste of police time. And that's official, OK?"

He nods at the door. The exchange is over. For a long moment, Fairfax toys with sharing the news from Mona, with laying out the facts, with putting together all the tiny bits of *Palisade's* jigsaw they've managed to winkle out of McGuigan. But

one look at Bhatti tells him it's hopeless. The people who run the country badly need to put an end to *Palisade*. And in the shape of the weights-bulked figure behind the desk, they've found it.

Charlie McGuigan is formally charged with attempted homicide at 16.21. If anything, he seems relieved. The last Fairfax sees of him is the faintest trace of a smile as the turnkeys escort him back to the cells. The handcuffs are Khalida's idea, a token bid to keep him from doing anything silly.

In the car, riding back to Invictus House, neither Fairfax nor Khalida says a word. When he gets to the MIR, Fairfax tidies his desk, sorts through his interview notes, and begins to type a long account of his dealings with McGuigan over the past two days. He leaves nothing out. Except the intelligence from Mona.

By the time he's finished, the MIR is nearly empty. The job is done and McGuigan is on his way to the remand wing of Wormwood Scrubs. Tomorrow he'll stand before a magistrate before committal to the Crown Court. The case is 100% secure. The man is a terrorist. He'll face a long sentence.

Fairfax finishes his report and gets to his feet for a stretch. Then he bends to his PC and navigates his way to where *Palisade* keeps the details of the journalists present at Merrist House when McGuigan made his entrance. Fairfax scrolls slowly down the list, then stops. The *Guardian* has always been his paper of choice. He makes a note of the name and the contact number.

Half an hour later, parked up beside a phone box in West London, he makes the call. The journo's wife comes to the phone. She goes away to find her husband. Fairfax gazes at the receiver, knowing that this is the moment of decision. From here on, there's no going back. He's crossing a line. He's doing a McGuigan. Why? Because it needs to be done. Then comes a voice in his ear.

"Who is this, please?"

Fairfax hesitates a moment longer. Rain pebbles the grimy glass. Headlights flare. At last he bends to the phone, then pauses before hanging up. There's another way, he suddenly thinks to himself. Of course, there is.

Sapir Dahan

(Translated into English by Yossi Elon)

One

I lived with an artist once. His name was Yitzhak Elon. At the time, he was even older than my dad. I was just seventeen.

Yitzhak didn't like the name Yitzak and so I did what everyone else in his life did, and called him Elon. He lived in the Arab part of Haifa down by the docks. I went that way to school every day and a bunch of us used to hang out after lessons in the same Arab café. Elon would drop by most afternoons. He smoked a lot of dope he scored from the Arabs and he was generous when it came to sharing.

We knew he lived in a big old apartment over a garage near our school. We all liked the way he dressed, unbuttoned shirt, torn jeans, and we loved the way he wore his hair. He had great hair, thick and black, not a trace of grey. It grew way beyond his shoulders and most times he would gather it with a twist of ribbon. The ribbons were multi-coloured. My favourite was green. During the summer, and into the autumn, Elon would walk the streets barefoot. We loved that, too.

There were girls older than us who fancied him and when he invited them back to where he lived, they would fuck him. In return, he would draw them nude in charcoal on this heavy white paper and they'd bring these trophies into school. It used to drive the boys mad. They told us he was a pervy old guy who should have known better but none of us took any notice. Elon, to us, was different. And he felt dangerous. And we liked that.

The first time I went back with Elon it happened to be my birthday. For some reason I've always hated the kind of attention that comes with family occasions and I was happy to keep it a secret.

To get to Elon's apartment you had to go in by a side door in the garage and climb up a metal fire escape and then go in through the back. It was the late afternoon and there was a lot of banging going on in the garage downstairs. Elon explained that the mechanic had sold up a couple of years ago and the business was

now in the hands of a panel beater. This was a guy who repaired wrecked cars and Elon had known him from way back.

Most weeks, he used to give Elon offcuts of sheet steel he didn't need, and Elon could take his pick from all the stuff from traffic accidents that he'd otherwise junk. This was how Elon got into the sculpture work that made his name. There's a roundabout in Buenos Aires with one of Elon's pieces in the middle. He told me it was a commission to mark some anniversary to do with the Malvinas Islands. He showed me a photograph. It looked like a car crash.

I loved Elon. I loved the way even the mention of his name sent my mother crazy. I loved the way he let me hang out with him around the Arabs. I loved the food he ate, Arab food, falafel and salads and bowls of hummus. I loved the way he got stoned instead of pissed. And I loved the way we fitted together. I'd left school by now and because Elon thought it was a neat idea I moved in with him.

He was a lazy man, Elon, certainly a lazy lover. He would start and stop, roll another spliff, tell me stories from the old days, start to fuck me again, then reach down from the bed and make a note on the pad he always kept to hand. I never took any of this stuff personally – I just felt really comfortable with him – and in the end I was more interested in the stories than anything else.

Elon was born on a kibbutz on the coast south of Haifa. This was a couple of years before the War of Independence, way back in the forties. His mum and dad and the rest of them had come from Eastern Europe, and ended up on this patch of semi-drained swampland beside the Mediterranean. They were peasant farmers and the way Elon used to tell it not much had changed by the time he was old enough to work in the orchards and fish ponds.

The kibbutzniks ran a dairy herd on the pastureland reclaimed from the swamp and they raised chickens, also. The kibbutz way of life has pretty much gone now but back then all the kids grew up together, maybe seeing their parents every afternoon for tea and cakes. It was a life without money or personal possessions and Elon knew nothing different. He grew close to the cattle. He had an affinity with them. He understood the way they thought, why they took one route back to the milking shed and not another, and pretty soon the guys who knew most about the cattle agreed that he could become a cowherd.

South of the kibbutz, where the land was still untouched, there were the remains of an old Roman dam and an aqueduct. Elon had a dog by now and he and the dog used to roam in the long grass, exploring the ancient stones, and he began to take a pencil and pad and make sketches. I've seen some of those sketches. It's hard to believe he was eight years old when he made them.

When he became a teenager, the kibbutz began to change. There were more buildings, more room for new immigrants, a brand new dining room, proper refrigeration, new concrete fish ponds for carp and gray mullet, better ways of gathering the apples from the fruit trees, even a swimming pool. The way of life was the same but some of the older guys knew this wouldn't last and so they bought a couple of cameras, one for movies, one for stills, and gave it to Elon. By this time, he was making lots of pictures, drawings, sketches. He was good at it and they knew that, and so they asked him to photograph the place before everything changed forever.

Elon still had some of those movies and he showed them to me, a taste of the way life used to be. They were colour, 8mm film. No one was fat. Everyone was grinning. On Friday nights, an old man played the accordion and the grown-ups danced. There was a film club, too, proper films, and during the summer, when we couldn't sleep in his apartment because of the heat, Elon would light another spliff and prop himself up in bed and tell me the story of *Battleship Potemkin*, and *Jules et Jim*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. They showed these movies outside on the kibbutz once it had got dark, projected onto white sheets sewn together, strung between two poles, and Elon loved the way the wind from the sea ruffled the sheets as the movie was playing. It was like watching movies on flags, he said.

When the war came in 1967, Elon was doing his Army service. All the military effort was in the south and in Jerusalem to begin with. Elon was in Sinai, fighting with Sharon's armoured division, and there were guys in his unit who were as worried about taking on three Arab nations as he was, but we won that war in a week and by the time he got back to the kibbutz, the country was very different. Wherever you looked on the map we'd pushed the borders deep into Arab territory and that changed everything.

Elon already had a partner at the kibbutz, a girl he'd grown up with. After the war, they got married and after Elon had finished his army service they decided to stay at the kibbutz to make the most of the peace. The place was safe now. Or so they thought.

Then, in 1978, a bunch of Palestinian terrorists landed on the beach just outside the kibbutz and hijacked a bus to take them towards Tel Aviv. They massacred 38 Israelis, and also shot and killed an American nature photographer from the kibbutz who was taking pictures on the beach for a book. Elon never talked much about this incident, no matter how many questions I asked, but I found out from other people that he still blamed himself for what had happened. They should have taken greater care. They should have anticipated something like this. The peace had made them lazy. Never take anything for granted. Never lower your guard.

By this time, Elon and his wife had a baby son. That's why they left the kibbutz. His name was Yossi and he's watching me as I write this account.

Two

Yossi lives on top of the Golan Heights at the very north of Israel in a simple shack he built himself. This patch of land used to be Syria. The walls are made of rocks he gathered from the hillside, roughly bonded with mortar. The four rooms are timber-framed inside, with doors that more or less fit, and the roof, which slants towards the back, is made of corrugated sheets reinforced with steel to hold the water tank and three solar panels.

Yossi draws fresh water from a spring two hundred metres down the mountain, and he has a pump to pipe the water up the hill. Recently, a couple of years back, he gave in to my pressure for a decent concrete floor. The floor is far from even, and still has Yossi's footprints in it, but we bought rugs from the Druze village a couple of miles away and at night, with the generator whirring outside in the darkness, the place is near perfect.

Jews, I've learned, love to command the heights. Maybe it's a mediaeval thing. Maybe it comes from the ghettos. Maybe it's got to do with insecurity. But whichever way you cut it, we love living on top of a view. It was true in Haifa: the Arabs at the bottom of Mount Carmel, then the streets of houses getting slowly whiter and richer until you climb up the last flight of endless steps and find yourself in bling heaven. The Dan Carmel Hotel. Cafes selling fifty-*shekel* capuccinos. Mall shops with \$20,000 bridal trousseaus in their window. The blessings of conquest. And altitude.

Yossi, as it happens, agrees with me completely about height. He did his national service in the Air Force and learned to fly in the process. Afterwards, he was a pilot with El-Al for a while which is why he speaks such good English. Nowadays, when he needs to earn, he works for a cropdusting outfit in the Negev, criss-crossing long fields of irrigated barley and wheat, hour after hour in a beaten-up old biplane. At the end of the day, with his boss's blessing, he climbs back into his little plane and takes himself higher, way up above the Judean wilderness, and he says nothing can come closer to playing God.

Nowadays he's still on top of the mountain, still playing God, still crazy about the view, and the silence, and the wind blowing up from the valley floor, and I don't know a happier man. His dad, Elon, warns him that nothing lasts forever but we Jews have known that since the dawn of time. Best enjoy it while we can, I tell him. At whatever cost.

Three

Shin Bet are the spooks in Israel. They run the internal security service. We also call them Shabak.

They first approached me when I was doing my Army service. I'd picked up a lot of street Arabic from my year with Elon and they'd spotted that I was an unusually good fit with the Palestinians on the West Bank where I was posted. This is true. Most kids my age would cross the street rather than pass an Arab on the sidewalk and regarded them as a different species. The polite word is *untermensch*. If you're after one of history's ironies, look no further.

I was posted to an army base on the West Bank north of Jerusalem. That morning, I was supposed to be on duty at a checkpoint outside Ramallah but the Lieutenant in charge of our unit told me to stay behind because someone wanted to have a word with me. The way he put it made me feel that I'd stepped out of line, which intrigued the rest of my unit, but I now understand that's the way Shin Bet always operate. These people understand pressure. They really do.

There were two of them, a man and a woman. By this time, I was nearly at the end of my Army service. To my surprise – and maybe the surprise of others – I'd really enjoyed it. I was fitter than I'd thought I could ever be, and I loved the physical challenges they threw at us. My range scores were way above average and I'd done the parachute jump course, which terrified me at first but then became an addiction. But more important than anything else was the freedom the spooks seemed to give to anyone they regarded as a bit different. I always liked to think of myself as different and within limits they encouraged that.

The Shin Bet woman was the older of the two and seemed to outrank the guy. She was smartly dressed, neat little blue suit, and could have fitted into any business meeting. She wanted to know what plans I had for after the army.

I was honest. I said at this point I didn't know. My dad, who was worried that I'd find my way back to Elon, had offered to get me across to the States where

we had relatives, but I wasn't keen. By then my thing with Elon had burned out – he was fucking too many other women – but I'd met Yossi, his son, and he was someone very different. This was a man much closer to my own age, someone I really felt close to, but someone I could never quite fathom. I liked that a lot, mainly because it reminded me of me.

And so I told the woman from Shin Bet that I hadn't a clue about the rest of my life. I loved Israel. I loved the life that I and my friends had made for ourselves. I loved the sunshine, and the music, and the summer raves on the beach back home. And I loved what I thought I might one day have with Yossi. But aside from all that I was open to offers.

The woman said she'd talked to various officers about me. They'd been impressed by the way I handled the Arabs. That, they'd said, was rare. I shrugged. I remember being cool about it. I told them I'd made lots of Arab friends in Haifa. I said I liked their take on life. I told them I loved the small courtesies that appear to pass us Jews by. And above all I said I admired the fact that Arabs responded so warmly if you wanted to be their buddy. That seemed to unsettle her.

"You mean Palestinians?"

"Of course.

"So how do you feel about it politically?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"The settlements. The settlers. The checkpoints. The occupation."

"You want the truth?"

"Yes, please."

"I think some of it's a fucking disgrace."

"Why?"

"Because these people deserve better. And we should have the courage to do something about that."

"Like what?"

"I haven't a clue. I'm a soldier, not a politician. But maybe they're the same as us. Maybe that's where we've gone so wrong."

"You think that? You think this country's on the wrong track? The wrong path?"

“Yeah, to be honest sometimes I do.”

I remember applying the brakes at that point, reigning myself in. I clearly hadn't done anything wrong – quite the contrary – but I wasn't quite sure how much honesty this conversation could take.

It was at this point that the guy had his say. He'd obviously been listening very hard. He asked me whether I regarded myself as a patriot.

“If you mean an Israeli, then the answer's yes.”

“And does that mean you'd be prepared to serve in another capacity? Not just the army?”

Military service in Israel is more or less compulsory. As I pointed out. What exactly was he saying?

“I'm asking you whether you'd be prepared to stay on in the West Bank.”

“Doing what?”

“We'd have a role for you.”

“We?”

“Shin Bet.”

“To do what?”

“To make a nuisance of yourself. To protest. To make more Arab friends. To see it their way. To voice what you so obviously feel.”

“To become a spy, you mean?”

“No. Not at all. We'd obviously want you to stay in touch but only in the most general terms. We're not talking betrayal here. We wouldn't want you to inform on people. We have lots of ways of doing that already. That's not a problem for us.”

“So...what are you saying? I'm lost.”

I remember them exchanging glances. The woman wanted the guy to keep talking. That was a savvy decision. In a way, I was starting to like him, and she sensed that. When I pushed him a little harder about what he really wanted, he said it was a question of something he called licence.

“We'd allow you free rein,” he said. “You're passionate about what you believe. We admire that. There's no kind of script here. We don't have to put together any kind of story. All we have to know is where your heart really lies.”

“You mean with us or with them?”

“Exactly,” he had a nice smile. “So what’s the answer?”

“The answer is I’m a Jew. And an Israeli. That comes with the territory. There’s no way round that. But if you want the truth, I’m bright enough, and honest enough, and fucking *decent* enough to know that we’re making some very big mistakes with these people and it would be nice to think that one day that might change.”

“Sure,” I remember him nodding. “Like how?”

“Like treating them as human beings for a start. And like getting ourselves out of their face.”

“They want to destroy us, Sapir.”

“Sure, some do. And you know what? Some don’t. I’m with the don’ts. And you know something else? There are lots of don’ts.”

I thought I was going to get a round of applause. The guy looked really pleased. Looking back, it was like passing some kind of audition.

Four

I heard nothing more for a couple of months. I assumed they'd taken a look at me and had a chat afterwards and changed their minds. Too outspoken. Too independent. Too headstrong. Too difficult. Too *free*. Wrong.

By now I'd finished my military service and gone back to real life. I spent a couple of months working at a retreat by the Sea of Galilee called the Pilgerhaus because I needed the peace and the solitude to try and decide what to do next, but real life turned out to be Yossi.

I'd met him a number of times when he was visiting with his dad in Haifa and we'd become close. Later that summer, he invited me back to his little shack on the Golan heights. I left the Pilgerhaus and stayed with Yossi for a week, and then another week, and then a week after that. He grew squash and spinach and fresh herbs in the garden he'd made, plus all kinds of other stuff, and he ran chickens for eggs and fresh meat. Up there on the Golan time ceased to have any real meaning and we spent most of our days just talking, *kibbitzing*, comparing notes. He had a dog I took for walks when I wanted to get away by myself, a mongrel called Lou. I loved it up there. Real peace. Real solitude.

Yossi had a beaten-up old Renault van and when we were low on supplies we'd bump down the track and then head across the valley to a town called Kiryat Shemona. KS is probably the ugliest place in Israel, but I guess that's the price you pay for living under years of bombardment. We'd prowl around the market and stock up on flour and long-life milk and slabs of Taybeh beer and then head home. Our last stop was always the post office to pick up Yossi's mail. Which is how I came to be back in touch with Shin Bet.

They'd contacted my dad, who'd put them onto Elon, who'd let them have Yossi's address. I think by now my dad had given up on me. In any event, they – whoever "they" were – wanted to meet me again. By this time, because of Yossi, I wasn't sure I wanted to be any part of some double life on the West Bank but then I

told him about that one conversation we'd had when I was still in the Army and to my surprise he thought I should go for whatever they had in mind. When it comes to patriotism, Yossi is the genuine article. This is a guy who – however briefly – flew Mirage jets. He'd happily bomb the shit out of anyone who lifted a finger against Israel.

And so, I wrote back and said yes, I'd be happy to meet. I thought I'd be taking the bus down to Haifa or Tel Aviv for a meeting in some office or other but I was wrong. They arrived very early one morning. On the Golan. By helicopter.

We were still in bed. Hearing the noise, Yossi grabbed the Uzi he still kept and stepped out into the dawn. It can be freezing up there, especially at that hour, and he wasn't wearing very much. The noise got louder and louder, and the dog was barking, and Yossi was telling these people to fuck off, and then suddenly the engine cut out and all I could hear was someone laughing. It was the same guy I'd met before. It turned out his name was Avram.

Yossi made him and the pilot some coffee. The news that these guys were spooks had calmed him down. After a while, Avram wanted to discuss business so Yossi took the dog for a walk and the pilot stayed in the helicopter.

Avram had an offer to make. This was 2002. There was big trouble on the West Bank and – in uniform – I'd seen some of it for myself. The Palestinians called it the Second Intifada, which literally means "shaking off". The people they wanted to shake off were us, and I didn't blame them.

Did I want us to leave the West Bank completely? I didn't know. Was I glad we had the whole of Jerusalem? Definitely, yes. My dad had lost some good friends there, and I loved the place, it's wholeness, its completeness. But did we ever have the right to make life so miserable for these people? Absolutely not.

And so, I asked Avram what he had in mind. Once again, he said he wanted me to go and make a nuisance of myself on the West Bank.

"Where on the West Bank?"

"We thought Jenin to begin with."

Jenin was perfect. The refugee camp sprawls over a hillside on the outskirts of the city. We called it "the martyrs' capital", or "suicide central" because the militants in the camp sent so many young Palestinians to their deaths. The

Palestinian Authority did their best to keep a lid on the place, but it was always the guys with the guns who made the real decisions. When I was in uniform, we targeted the camp during an operation called *Defensive Shield*, trying to clean it out, but ran into an ambush. One of the guys we killed over the weeks of fighting that followed was a 37-year-old quadriplegic called Jamal Fayid, who was crushed to death in his wheelchair when we bulldozed his house. That, as you can imagine, won us few friends.

Avram asked me whether I knew Jenin.

"I served there. I was there in April."

"*Defensive Shield*?"

"Yes."

Avram nodded, said nothing. I wanted to know what making a nuisance of myself meant.

"We want you to hook up with the activists. Do what they do. It shouldn't be hard. Not for you."

"How much freedom do I have?"

"As much as you need. Here's a list of organisations. You'll know most of them already."

He gave me the list. International Womens' Peace Service. Birthright Unplugged. Global Exchange. Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. It went on and on, proof that conscience still mattered in this country of mine. I looked up. I'd seen the list before. It was standard issue if you served on the West Bank.

"I get to choose one of these?"

"You get to do whatever you want. We just need you to be visible. To do what you think necessary. To get angry. To make life hard for us."

"And I report back? Give you names? Rat people out?"

"Not at all."

"Then I don't understand. You're going to *pay* me for this?"

"Of course." He mentioned a monthly sum to be deposited in whichever bank account I cared to nominate. It was twice what I'd been getting in the IDF.

The deal felt lopsided. There was no point pretending otherwise.

"So, what are you getting in return?"

“Nothing. Yet.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we want you out there with the activists, out there with the Palestinians. We want you to make a name for yourself. We want you to be very high profile. You’ll get arrested. This will be for real. There’ll be no Shabak marker in your IDF file. Things might get rough for you. This is kosher, Sapir, believe me.”

“But to what end?”

“We don’t know yet. But when it happens, we’ll be in touch.”

“When what happens?”

He smiled at me. Said again he didn’t know. He wanted me to think of myself in terms of a national asset. The phrase made me laugh but it turned out he meant it.

“We’re not asking you to do anything you might be doing already. We know you’re genuine about this stuff. That’s the whole point. You don’t have to pretend. And we’re not asking you to rat people out, to be some kind of informer, anything like that. But when the time comes, we need to know that you’re still an Israeli, still a believer.

I shrugged. In some ways this sounded like a perfect opportunity. Avram was right. I believed we’d crossed all kinds of lines on the West Bank and it felt totally natural, as well as worthwhile, to add my voice to those of others. On the other hand, I was wary about getting caught up in some kind of spook conspiracy. How could I be totally free when others would be watching me? Waiting for whatever ambush lay down the road?

“So whose number do I have if things go wrong?” I asked him. “Who do I talk to?”

“Me”, he said. “Could you live with that?”

Five

I went to Jenin about a month later. It was Yossi's decision as much as mine. He loved all the spook shit and was already visualising the movie I'd be starring in years down the line. When I told him I was doing this thing because I believed in it, because I thought we were so often out of line on the West Bank, he just laughed.

"That's what makes the deal so clever," he'd say.

"Whose deal?"

"Theirs. Shabak's. You're their lady in waiting. Take it as a compliment."

I tried to but it still made no sense so in the end I gave up thinking about it. They wanted me to be me? No problem. They were going to give me money for doing something I believed in? Yes, please.

In Jenin, I hung out for a while with a bunch of French guys who were trying to get clean water into what was left of the refugee camp. There I listened to some of the women's accounts of the way it had been when we sent the bulldozers in. This stuff was deeply shaming, not at all comfortable, but it fed an anger that was already inside me and by Christmas – I guess from Avram's point of view – I'd become the genuine article: a shrill little obsessive who'd rock up to the checkpoints and tell the guys with the guns, sometimes men and women I'd served with, exactly what I really thought of them.

I wasn't the only one doing this. There were dozens of us. But for whatever reason I began to get myself a reputation on the Arab street. You want someone to trace a son or a husband who's just been lifted by the Israelis? Ghosted away to God knows where? Ask Sapir. You need representation after a bunch of soldiers have trashed your house? Tossed sound bombs through the window? Terrorised your kids? Give Sapir a ring. The caseload got heavier by the week and pretty soon I was starting to wonder whether I should be asking Avram for a raise. Then came a call from Ramallah that pretty much changed everything.

To my shame, I'd never heard of Hazeem Sharabi, but it turned out he'd heard of me. He had good Hebrew on the phone, which isn't that usual for an Arab, and a very deep voice. I remember thinking at the time that he was putting it on, trying to make out he was some kind of big famous guy, and when he invited me to some party thing he was organising, I just laughed.

"Who are you?" I remember saying. "And why me?"

He didn't answer either question. Just come, he said. You won't regret it.

The invite was for the following week. I took a shared taxi to Ramallah. I was to meet Hazeem in a big hotel on the outskirts of the city on the Jerusalem side. He was waiting for me in the first-floor bar. I couldn't see any other guests.

He was a big man, huge shoulders, thick neck. My hand disappeared into his and he said it was a pleasure to meet me. He said I was smaller than he'd expected, and even prettier. He'd admired what I'd been up to in Jenin, and wanted to say what he called a collective thank you.

"On whose part?"

"All of us. All of us who live in this shit-hole. All of us who'd like life to be different."

He bought me lunch. There was no party. I'm not sure what the waiters made of the hippy girl with the guy in the thousand-dollar suit but it seemed to make no difference to my new friend.

I liked him. I liked the size of the man, the warmth of the man, how proud he was of what he'd done with his life. He said he'd made a fortune in the construction business, using the money to move into property development and all kinds of other stuff. He showed me photos of his wife and four kids. He took me back to the days when he was much younger, and he was trying to make a name as a professional wrestler. And when the meal was over, and he asked whether I'd like to become his mistress, it seemed the most logical thing in the world.

I turned him down that day, but he wasn't the least bit upset. On the steps of the hotel he took my hands in his, kissed me lightly on both cheeks, told me again how beautiful I was, and then gave me his business card. The offer stood. I was to phone any time on the private number he'd written on the back. If I changed my mind, nothing could ever make him happier. If I didn't, he wished me luck. Palestine,

he said, was lucky to have me. Then he bent to the cab, handed the driver a hundred US dollars, and settled me gently in the rear seat.

“Take care of her,” he told the driver. “And bring her back one day.”

I phoned Avram that same night. We hadn't been in touch for more than a year and he'd honoured our handshake deal in full. No calls. No pressure. Not one hint that it was the spooks that were paying my grocery bills.

I asked him about Hazeem. He said the guy was one of the top Palestinian businessmen. He'd made a great deal of money, some of it from the Israelis, and had the ear of some powerful people in Tel Aviv.

I was intrigued about the Israeli link. What, exactly, did Avram mean?

“Hazeem is supplying most of the concrete for the wall”, he said, “Plus raw materials for the settler roads.”

“So, he's making a profit out of the Occupation? Is that what you're telling me?”

“He is. Of course, he is. That's what businessmen do. But it goes way beyond that. Hazeem believes that Palestine will only prosper if it helps itself. He's never made a secret of dealing with us. He regards it as normal business practice. He wants the border with Jordan opened. He wants free trade. He wants to flood the place with money because he thinks money brings peace.”

“And is he right?”

“Yes, I think he is.”

“So will it happen?”

“I've no idea,” he paused. “So why the call? Why all the questions?”

I explained about the lunch in Ramallah.

“The guy wants me to become his mistress,” I said. “Does this fit in the masterplan?”

“There is no masterplan.”

“But should I do it?”

“That depends whether you want to.”

“But would it be worth it?”

“For us, you mean?”

It was a good question. I remember staring at the phone. Who, exactly, were “us”?

“We’re talking Israel here?” I asked him.

“We are.”

“So, should I be screwing him for the motherland?”

“Only if you want to. Only if it feels right.”

“So that’s my call?”

“It is. Yours, and yours alone. *Kol Tuv, Sapir.*” In Hebrew, *Kol Tuv* means ‘Go well’.

I was back in Ramallah that same month. Hazeem and I met at a different hotel. This time I stayed the night.

Six

Hazeem, in so many ways, turned out to be the perfect foil for my hectic services to activism on the West Bank. He was the soul of calm. He treated me as a friend, someone to talk to, to bounce ideas around, as well as someone who would breeze in and liven up his sex life. He was a considerate lover, astonishingly conversative, and seemed to take a real pride in taking care of me. He knew, of course, that I was Israeli and I began to suspect that he'd also guessed that there was more to me than met the eye, but I like to think that I became someone who really mattered to him.

Throughout this period – we're talking nearly four years – I made the journey back to the Golan Heights as often as I could. Yossi stayed my anchor. He was fascinated by what I was doing because it felt complicated and dangerous, and he pressed me for the smallest detail of what was happening on the West Bank.

I told him as much as I could but I never bothered him with Hazeem because Yossi can be very territorial when it comes to other men, which was a shame in many ways because the two of them had a lot in common. The same self-confidence. The same knack of putting you at ease. The same lazy assumption that circumstances have thrown you into lockstep and that nothing will ever change. Surfing the rapids between these two men taught me a great deal about staying afloat, about keeping the really important parts of me locked securely away. Two talents that were to prove a godsend when Charlie McGuigan stepped into my life.

I was still in Jenin the night we first met. I was guesting for a local football team – there are hundreds on the West Bank – and I was playing in goal. A power-cut had just turned the lights off when a face came out of the darkness. Looking back, it was the perfect entry – unannounced, slightly mysterious – but at the time I didn't give it much thought. Another slightly anguished media type looking for a story. Another lost soul with nowhere to sleep for the night.

I think we may have gone back to the place behind the main market I was sharing with a French guy, a male nurse working for *Medecins Sans Frontieres*. I remember Charlie had a couple of bottles of red wine in his rucksack and we couldn't find a corkscrew. Weed was what we used in those days, but my French flatmate was delighted. All three of us stayed up until the bottles were done, leaving just me and Charlie.

He was very intense. He had a lot to say, all of it interesting, and he came across as someone who was very vulnerable. His dad was dead. He hadn't a clue where his mother was living. He hadn't seen either his ex-wife or his daughter for more than ten years. He told me there was absolutely no one in his life he hadn't fucked up and as a result he seemed to have buried himself – these are his words – in the wreckage of a rather larger disaster.

At the time, I hadn't a clue what he was talking about but he slept the rest of the night on the floor and once we'd got up next morning, he showed me articles he'd written for a magazine in London. He'd been in Gaza, reporting on the elections, and now the people in London wanted him to profile Khalid Mishal. Mishal was the biggest figure in Hamas, and Hamas were big on the West Bank, and Charlie seemed to think I could fix an interview. I don't know where he'd got this idea – he mentioned someone in Gaza I'd never heard of – but there was something about him that intrigued me so I told him I'd see what I could do.

He left a copy of the Gaza article with me and I read it that night. The guy wrote like an angel. I'd never been to Gaza at that point, but he brought the place to life. I could see it, smell it, taste it. He seemed to have the kind of closeness I understood with the people who lived there, and a real gift for getting them to confide in him. This wasn't the usual hand-wringing crap that passes for journalism in the Middle East. This was compelling. It made you want to read more. You trusted it because this guy had an eye for the right details, and knew how to put together what he'd seen and heard. Reading that article taught me stuff I'd never even thought about before. This was something I'd never expected, least of all from a foreigner. I wanted to know lots more about Charlie McGuigan.

It turned out the pull was mutual. To look at, the man was nothing: skinny, not much hair, no obvious presence. As far as I could see, he lived on thin air. He

enjoyed a drink and he loved conversation with people he trusted but he could be in a room for minutes on end before anyone realised he was there. He once described himself as a ghost in his own life, which is pretty much perfect. He hated attracting attention to himself, which was probably why we got on so well. By nature, I'm forceful and occasionally louder than I should be. Charlie, by contrast, reminded me of a submarine. Submerge. Up periscope. Take a good look round. Then dive deeper. I found the man fascinating.

He was brave, too, in ways I wasn't, and he was very clever in handling situations that could have become ugly. There are lots of kids on the West Bank who are unwell. Maybe it's congenital. Maybe it has to do with the conditions they have to live in. But you see a lot of them in out the street, often in wheelchairs. The families take care of them, the women especially, but also the men.

One of these kids, he had to be in his late teens, didn't like Charlie at all. I don't know why because he was doing his best to help the family but one morning they bumped into some men in the street and the kid pointed at Charlie and said he was an Israeli spy. The men believed him. It got nasty. More men arrived. There were no police around, no troops, no one to intervene. Charlie was in the middle of all this and I did my best to get in to help him, but it turned out I didn't have to.

Some of these guys spoke English. He talked them down. He calmed them. He told them to go see the boy's mother. He told them about the family. He knew the boy's name. He even knew what kind of music he liked. Ask him about The Arctic Monkeys, he told them. Then ask him who paid for the downloads.

That was impressive. Charlie showed no fear. Not then, and not later. I had to move from Jenin. I went down to Nablus and Charlie came with me. He'd found himself a job with a Danish guy, a really good NGO, and Charlie and I had started to hang out together. There was nothing physical at this stage, but we talked all the time and I think for both of us that was a big turn-on.

Then came the moment when the IDF invaded Nablus. They had a list of names, hard-liners they wanted to put away. They arrived in the middle of the night, and as usual they tore the place apart. I knew about this stuff – curfews, house searches, mass arrests – because I'd been part of it, done it myself, but being on the receiving end was very different. You feel helpless. You realise these people can get

away with anything they want. That's seriously scary. But Charlie didn't flinch. Not once.

I remember that second day. The place was still in lock-down but some of the street kids were brave enough to come out and start stoning the troops and they responded with tear gas. We'd just come out of my place and you could smell the stuff in the air. Charlie went straight back in the house. When he came back out again, he had a couple of flannels soaked in vinegar, one for him, one for me. That's exactly what you should do – you breathe through the cloth and the acid in the vinegar helps neutralise the chemicals – but we'd never talked about it.

Later that day, I asked him how he knew. The question made him laugh. This was pretty rare, believe me, but it turned out that his mum had taught him the vinegar trick when he was a kid in Belfast. There was all kinds of trouble on the streets, he said, and that's what you did when the squaddies started lobbing the tear gas grenades. This was the first time he'd mentioned what he called The Troubles. I knew his dad had died when he was a baby, but I didn't know why. The fact that he'd been a Provo, a freedom fighter, made a lot of sense. Charlie had some of that. What he believed in mattered to him. What he believed in justified all the risks he was prepared to take. I could see it.

We started sleeping together after the IDF withdrew from Nablus. I think they got most of the people they were after but on the West Bank that doesn't make much difference because there are so many kids to take their place. Charlie had figured that out already. He picks up things really quickly. He knew the fighting, the resistance, wasn't going to go away and he wanted to do whatever he could to let the rest of the world know what was happening. He wrote and wrote and wrote and most of it got published.

That was exciting. The West Bank can become a bit of a prison. In your head you need to know there are people listening out there and Charlie was one of the reporters they seemed to trust. He was making himself a reputation. He'd show me the e-mails he was getting from London. The people on the magazine wanted more and more. There were e-mails from readers, too. Charlie was the man. What he needed now was a really big story which I guess is why we went down to Gaza.

Seven

This was the end of 2008. People we knew in Nablus said there was trouble coming in Gaza. Hamas were still the government down there, still making the place work, but they were still firing rockets into Israel, still not behaving themselves, and that was driving the Likud people nuts. A bunch of terrorists had no right to be winning elections. Democracy had got into the wrong hands. Hamas had to be taught a lesson.

The bombardments started around Christmas. What happened back in Nablus was nothing compared to what we went through in Gaza. The bombing and the rocketing and the shelling went on for weeks. The Israelis said they tried to avoid civilian casualties but in a situation like that you can't. Kids died every day, just blown apart. Schools got hit, mosques, power stations, even hospitals.

Once the IDF starts something like that they mean to finish it, and believe me they did. They have a list of targets. They're getting plenty of intelligence from intercepts and informers on the ground and the target list gets longer and longer. These guys back in the command bunkers are working through that list and no way are they going to stop until the job is done.

For them it must have been very logical, very necessary. They're delivering what the politicians want and if you didn't happen to be around to see the flesh and blood consequences then I suppose it must make some kind of military sense. Charlie called them Nazis. Some days, I thought that was hard on the Nazis.

The bombardments lasted just over six weeks. Charlie coped with it better than me. He was writing every day, taking photographs, bearing witness, and he was firing off reports to his magazine in London. Working that hard must protect you from the worst of the stuff you're seeing but I was getting seriously depressed. These were my people, people I knew, people I'd grown up with. How could they possibly do stuff like this? How could they watch the pictures every day on TV – kids

bleeding to death, houses blown apart, white phosphorous shells – and not realise what they were doing?

I tried to talk to Charlie about it. I told him I was ashamed to be Israeli. He tried to help me. I know he did. He sat, and listened, but deep down I don't think any of what we were seeing came as any kind of surprise to him. It was down there in Gaza that I realised that Charlie has a very black view of the world – maybe bleak is a better word. He said he knew this was going to happen. He said it was horrible and beyond belief and all the rest of it, but he also said it would happen again and again unless something really major came along, something really big. I remember asking him what that something might be, and he said he didn't know. The word he used was game changer.

By the time the Israelis had said yes to a ceasefire, I'd had enough. The shelling and the bombing had stopped but there were still troops and tanks around the edges of the Strip. Farmers worked the fields along the border and after three weeks of doing nothing they needed to get their crops in. It was still dangerous because the Israelis would shoot at them. You're shooting to miss but if you're at the receiving end that isn't always obvious. NGOs agreed to stand beside the farmers as they worked in the fields to show solidarity and Charlie and I were part of that.

The first day wasn't too bad. I could tell that the guys in the dunes knew what they were doing. They'd creep the shots closer and closer but their weapons were properly sighted and unless you did something stupid – made the wrong move – you wouldn't get killed. But that wasn't the point. Every time someone pulled a trigger, every time there was a bang, everyone hit the ground. It's a reflex. It's natural. That's what you do. It's what came next that really upset me. Because the guys in the dunes, the children with our lives in their hands, were laughing. They wanted to make us dance. They thought it was a game. They thought it was funny.

I thought about it that night. I couldn't get the laughter out of my head. That was what really hurt me. The laughter. Next day, back in the fields, it happened again. I put up with it for a while but then I lost it completely and just started walking towards them. I didn't care whether they killed me. In fact, I'd really have welcomed it. I'd had enough.

In the end, I got close enough to have a conversation. Until I opened my mouth, I don't think they realised I was Israeli. I told them they were animals. I told them they were a disgrace. I told them to fuck off back to Israel, back to their video games, and give someone else a hard time. I was just so *angry*. Then I started back.

That night, Charlie and I got really drunk. The farmer's wife made us this big meal, and the farmer gave us wine, and we just drank and drank. I knew Charlie was proud of me for what I'd done but that wasn't the point. Something inside had snapped. I wanted out.

Eight

We left Gaza and after a couple of weeks I made contact with Avram. I told him we needed to meet. He said that was fine and gave me the address of an apartment hotel in West Jerusalem. I hadn't seen this man for seven years.

The hotel was on George V Street. Avram was in an apartment on the first floor. He must have hired it for the day, I don't know.

I'd taken the bus up from Nablus. We talked for most of the afternoon. He said they were all really pleased with what I was doing on the West Bank. He made it sound like some kind of performance, which really made me angry all over again, so I pointed out that I meant it. He said he understood that. He said I had something really special going for me. The word he used was authenticity.

Authenticity? I went nuts, truly crazy, there in that room. I told him they were manipulating me. And I told him I'd had enough.

He managed to calm me down, which can't have been easy. He wanted to know about Gaza. I told him everything, in as much detail as I could remember. I wanted it to sound beyond grotesque. I wanted him to understand what we'd done down there. He said he agreed. He even said he thought it was excessive.

"Excessive? You mean evil."

"I mean excessive. We calibrate these things. Maybe we got it wrong."

He wanted to know about Charlie, how we were together, what he meant to me. I told him I admired the man.

"Just that?"

"That's a lot. There aren't many men I admire."

"Do you have a relationship?"

"Yes."

"Do you sleep with him?"

"Yes."

"Are you in love with him?"

“That’s none of your business.”

“Would you know if you were?”

That was a very clever question. This man knew me better than I thought. I told him Charlie was a very unusual person, brave in ways that mattered to me, gifted in ways I’d never met before.

“Gifted how?”

“Gifted as a writer. That’s one of the reasons I’m still with him. That’s partly why he matters to me so much. I guess I’ve put him in harm’s way. I guess I’ve opened his eyes. He’s certainly opened mine.”

Avram had a file of the pieces Charlie had published. They made quite a pile. He said he was making a reputation for himself back in Europe, not just London, and that this mattered.

“To who?”

“To both of us. To you because he’s letting the world know about what’s going on. And to us because he’s become credible. He has a profile, a presence.”

“You mean authenticity?”

“Exactly.”

“So why should that matter to you?”

“Because one day we may need him.”

“And you think you control this man?”

“No. But we think you do.”

At least he was honest. By now I think I’d worked this out by myself. And it was true, too. Charlie was a very needy person. I don’t think he’d met anyone like me in his life and I filled a very big hole. Most men would have hidden that truth, at least from other people. Not Charlie. He used to tell me how important I was to him, how I’d changed his life, how everything would turn to ratshit if I left him. I wasn’t altogether comfortable with this, but I was really really fond of the man, as well as deeply impressed. As far as Charlie was concerned, responsibility came with the turf. I was there to look after him, to keep him in one piece. And until Gaza, it had worked pretty well.

Avram wanted to know about Yossi.

“Yossi’s different. Yossi looks after Yossi. That man’s a real loner. If he never saw me again, he’d get over it.”

“You’re still together?”

“Of course. He does it for me.”

“And he knows nothing about McGuigan?”

“Nothing.”

“Or Hazeem?”

“Fuck, no. Hazeem would seriously upset him. Charlie he’d regard as a joke. Yossi is hopelessly macho. This is a guy who’s always lived in the world of real men.”

“And Charlie?”

“Charlie’s Charlie. Yossi wouldn’t know where to start.”

By the end of that afternoon, Avram had talked me into staying on the West Bank. He said Gaza had burned me out. He suggested I take a month off. He even offered to pay for Charlie and me to go away and have some kind of break. I said that wouldn’t be necessary. The month off was a great idea but I’d spend it on the Golan with Yossi.

That alarmed him. He wanted to know how Charlie would take it. I said Charlie wouldn’t be a problem. I’d tell him there was some kind of medical issue with my dad back in Haifa and that I’d be back just as soon as I’d fixed it. Part of Charlie’s charm was that he always believed me. I thought at first he didn’t mean it, but it turns out he did. How many men would take the whole of me on trust?

Nine

And so Charlie and I spent the next five years on the West Bank. We always maintained our separate apartments, partly to give Charlie the space he needed to write, and partly because I needed to tell myself I was still bossing this thing, but the truth was that we spent most nights together, his place or mine.

Charlie had made a real home for himself with the Danes and he was working even harder than me but we both knew that the political situation was getting grimmer and grimmer. More settlements. Not a hilltop that wasn't covered with shiny new houses. To my dad, the bare wilderness around Jerusalem was unrecognisable. Whatever so-called promises Netanyahu and the rest of them were making to the West, us Jews were here to stay.

Was I enjoying what I was up to on the West Bank? Yes, because I'd made some real friends amongst the Palestinians and I thought I'd made a difference to their lives. Did the pressure ever get to me again, the way it had in Gaza? No. Partly because we weren't getting the shit bombed out of us. And partly because I had a safety valve in the shape of Hazeem.

I'd introduced Charlie to him by now. I took him up to Ramallah and Hazeem bought us both lunch. Charlie reads these situations really well and it took him no time at all to figure out that Hazeem and I had something going. I saw no point in denying that we were friends, that we met from time to time, and that we fucked if we were in the mood. Charlie had difficulties with all of that, but I think he knew that the price of our relationship was me making my own decisions and although Hazeem upset him he never really pushed it. As long as things stayed sweet between us, as long as Charlie knew there was only one Charlie in my life, then he was happy.

That worked for Hazeem, too. This was a man who'd never pretended that there'd ever be a bigger space in his life for me. He had a lovely wife, kids he adored, plus an ever-growing reputation amongst the people who really ran the

West Bank, both Palestinian and Israeli. Unlike the Hamas people, and the jihadist crazies, he didn't let his faith get in the way of either politics or business. He was always pragmatic, always even-tempered, always trying to calculate the best outcome for Palestine. He had no time for extremism. He thought there was a lot wrong with both Hamas and Al-Fatah, and he said so. In this respect, he was reckless as well as brave, but he saw no point in disguising the way he felt. That kind of honesty won my admiration and I told him so. He was hard to say something like that to a man as big and powerful and self-confident as Hazeem, but I think he took it as a compliment. I certainly hope so.

Then, in June this year, things went crazy. Three Jewish kids were abducted on the road near Hebron. Days later, the IDF recovered their bodies. Netanyahu blamed Hamas, who he hated, and prepared to teach them a lesson. A crack-down on the West Bank lifted hundreds of Palestinians from their homes but we all knew that the whip would fall hardest on Gaza. Hamas were still in charge. They were still sending their rockets into Israel. Most of them never arrived, thanks to a fancy anti-missile gadget called *Iron Dome* but that wasn't point. Israelis were fed up with hearing the air raid siren going off all the time. Something had to be done.

In early July, it started. Netanyahu called up 40,000 reservists and the bombs started began to fall on Gaza again. This time it went on for nearly two months. They called it Operation *Protective Edge*. Both Charlie and I found it hard not to tune in to the coverage on CNN and Al-Jazeera, not to recognise buildings we knew once again reduced to rubble, but neither of us really wanted to go back. We'd borne witness five years ago and nothing had changed. The same queue of ambulances outside the Al-Shifa hospital. The same bandaged kids staring up at the camera. The same chaos in the streets when more coffins made their way to the graveyard. Charlie had been right. It was happening all over again.

This time, though, it was worse. By the time the fighting stopped, more than 2000 Gazans had been killed. That night, Hazeem was interviewed on television in Ramallah. He said that – in his opinion – Hamas had wasted Palestinian blood. Violence wasn't the answer anymore. Peace must come by another route. Brave, I remember thinking at the time.

Ten

My phone rang very early three days later. It was Avram. He asked me whether I'd heard the news. I said I hadn't. He told me that Hazeem had been shot dead at the front door of his villa outside Ramallah. Hamas had just released a statement accepting responsibility for the killing. Hazeem Sharabi, they said, had been the friend of Israel and the enemy of the true faith.

I woke Charlie. Charlie rubbed his eyes and held me tight and said he was really sorry. He said that killing someone on their front doorstep because you didn't like their take on religion was very Provo. At the time I didn't know exactly what he meant and I was too upset to ask.

Avram wanted me to go to Jerusalem again. We met at the same hotel, though a different apartment. I asked him why Hamas had really killed Hazeem.

"Because he dared to differ," he said.

"But why did he go public like that? Why spit in their face?"

"Because he thought he was immune. He had money, power, huge influence. He thought he was untouchable."

"He wasn't."

"You're right. No one's untouchable."

"Did they think he was running with us?"

"I've no idea what they thought."

"Was he running with us?"

"Not at all. He kept the channels open, like a good businessman should. He made money from us. A lot of it went back to West Bank charities. You'll know about those. But no, we never used him."

"Did you try?"

"Of course, we did."

"And?"

"He just laughed. He said we should know him better than that. He was his own man. Maybe that's where he went wrong."

I shook my head. *His own man*. That's exactly what he'd been.

Avram wanted to talk about Charlie. Did I know that he'd been invited to a meeting in London? A meeting with Sorenson?

"Yes."

"And?"

"He thinks it's amusing. He thinks he's become their tame West Banker. It's a press thing, some kind of preview for a big meeting Sorenson's holding the following day. He thinks he's there to give them a bit of street cred."

"He should take it as a compliment. He's built himself a reputation. The word is respect."

"He knows that."

"So, is he going?"

"Yes."

"Definitely?"

"Yes."

Avram nodded and turned away. Then he got up and went to the window and that was the moment I realised that whatever these people had been waiting for had finally arrived. Twelve years ago, they'd recruited me for a reason. They'd put me in place and waited and waited and now that reason, that opportunity, was here.

"What's going on?" I said. "What this about?"

Avram took his time. He was still looking out of the window. He confirmed that Hamas had killed Hazeem. He even had the killer's name, a young guy from Hebron with a reputation for never bungling a hit. Then he turned back to me and said that the Israeli cabinet had a problem.

"Like what?"

"They think Hamas have talked themselves into real negotiations."

"How?"

"By coming out of this Gazan thing still standing."

"You mean *Protective Edge*?"

"Yes."

"Negotiations with who?"

“Initially with Sorenson. Then with the Americans. That would be a disaster. As you probably agree.”

I remember nodding. All I could think about was Hazeem bleeding to death on his front doorstep. I'd seen press photos of his wife over the years. She was a beautiful woman. She clearly deserved a man like that. How would it feel to lose him? So big, so generous, so gentle.

I asked Avram what he was saying. He told me that Sorenson would be announcing the inclusion of Hamas in all future negotiations. Full diplomatic status. No quibbles.

“We need to head them off, Sapir. And we need you to help us.”

At this point he sat down again. I've no idea whether he'd rehearsed this little speech but at the time it made a lot of sense. There had to be a way, he said, to make the West realise the kind of people in Hamas they were really dealing with. We had to open their eyes. We had to do something really bold.

We Israelis love bold. We've written bold in the history books. The Six Day War. Entebbe. You name it. Big letters. Bold.

“So, what do you want to do?”

“We need to mount an operation. And to do that, we need access to Sorenson.”

I knew about Sorenson. Everyone on the West Bank knew about Sorenson. The guy who was supposed to solve our problems. The guy who jetted in and out of Jerusalem. The guy who was making serious money out of the Gulf Arabs and God knows who else.

“You have access to Sorenson,” I pointed out. “You can lift the phone and give him a ring.”

“That's not the kind of access we're after.”

“It's not?”

“No. We want to get very close to him. And we want to give the world a very big shock.”

“I don't understand.” I was staring at him. “You mean Charlie comes into this?”

“Yes.”

“So, what’s he supposed to do?”

“We haven’t decided, yet.”

“But you’ll have an idea.”

“Of course.”

“Care to tell me?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“When?”

“When the time is right.”

“But when will that be?”

“I don’t know.”

I nodded. I was trying to work this thing out. Already I sensed it might be ugly. Or maybe worse than ugly.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“We want you to leave him.”

“Leave him? Just like that?”

“Yes. No explanation. No reason. Just say it’s over.”

“He’ll fall apart.”

“That’s the point.”

“And then what?”

“And then we get in touch with him. Not me. Not even Shabak. Another agency.”

“Mossad?”

Avram didn’t answer. Just smiled. Mossad are the overseas spooks. Shabak with fancier weapons and a bigger expense account.

“Well?” Avram wanted an answer.

The question was too big. The implications were awesome. Israelis play hard ball in situations like these. Famous for it. If I said yes I had the uncomfortable feeling I’d be signing Charlie’s death sentence, either literally or in terms of his own sanity. On the other hand, Hamas had just hurt me very badly indeed and I wasn’t sure I wanted any more of this horrible game.

“Give me an hour?” I nodded at the door. “I promise I’ll be back.”

I had a glass of pulped juice at a bar along the street. I sat in the early autumn sunshine gazing into nowhere. In a strange kind of way, I loved Charlie. I loved the inside of his head, the spaces he'd made for me there, and I loved the way he could turn all the chaos we'd been part of into such great writing. On the other hand he'd come to rely on me completely and I could see no way forward for the relationship.

All these years, in my head, I'd been with Yossi. He didn't mind me being away all the time. He enjoyed his own company far too much for that. But he always said he'd missed me when I turned up again and I believed him. Yossi would give me plenty of space. Yossi would leave my head alone. Yossi would take care of every other part of me. Yossi was where my future lay.

I was back in the hotel within the half hour. When I stopped outside the room, I could hear Avram on the phone. He ended the conversation the moment I knocked on the door. He asked whether I wanted coffee.

I said no.

"Two conditions", I said.

"Name them."

"Number one, Charlie comes to no harm."

"You mean no physical harm?"

"Yes."

"He won't."

"You're in a position to guarantee that?"

"Yes."

"I have your personal word?"

"Yes."

I gave him a long hard look. He wanted to know about the other condition.

"There's a place I know on the shores of Lake Galilee. It's called the Pilgerhaus. I want to take Charlie there for a week. And I want you to pay for it."

"When?"

"In nine days time."

"Why not now?"

“That’s my business.”

Avram nodded. He was juggling dates in his head. Today was 2nd September.

“So, you wouldn’t leave him until 18th? At the earliest? Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Sorenson has called his meeting in London for November. That’s tight.

There’s a lot to do.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“Cut me a little slack here?”

“No. I have Charlie to myself until the 18th. That’s the deal.”

Avram had the grace to smile. Then he shrugged.

“You’re one tough lady,” he said. “Even for an Israeli.”

I nodded. I told him that was why they’d hired me in the first place. For once, I wasn’t the least proud of myself.

Eleven

Charlie and I went to the Pilgerhaus, as I'd planned. I hadn't been there since I'd left the Army all those years ago but very little had changed. It's a retreat place, run by German catholics, and works a bit like a hotel. Being a guest made a huge difference to washing dishes in the kitchen, but the place still spoke to me.

It spoke to Charlie, too. Avram had left the booking to me and I got us a big room on the top floor. The view of the water was framed by trees and you could see the mountains that climbed away towards the West Bank on the far side.

We swam in the lake that afternoon and then went back to the room and made love. Charlie was more relaxed than I'd ever seen him, and this feeling of peace grew day by day until we were struggling to get up in the morning. The sunshine came pouring in through the window and we'd roll around until we were exhausted.

By now I'd known this man for eight years. I never want to get married and I never want a honeymoon, but this came very close. Just walking together, swimming together, drinking together with no one else around were things we'd never done before. On the West Bank and Gaza you're never alone – that comes with the territory – but here beside the Galilee we could walk for five minutes and have the place to ourselves.

Towards the end of that week, I took Charlie into Tiberius. I knew a tattoo parlour where a school friend of mine had been. We had a few drinks first because Charlie wasn't at all sure about tattoos but in the end, he agreed to have one done. I thought it would be forever before he chose something from the style books they keep but I was wrong.

The Pilgerhaus has a logo they use on all their literature and around the hotel. It's the shape of a fish picked out in tiny blue tiles and he produced an

example. It was an easy thing to do. We were through in a couple of hours and it looked great on his skinny white bicep.

We were back in Nablus by the 18th. Charlie said it felt like being home again. I'd spent a week trying not to think about what was coming next, but I knew that things between us would never be as perfect again and that made it easier. We'd had the best of each other, the very very best. And so I'd end the relationship on a high, on the very top of our private mountain, and we'd never have that view again. I told myself that Charlie would be in good hands. I told myself I'd done my precious duty. And that now I could steal away and become a human being again.

The morning I went up to his little flat and told him, he was making coffee. We loved the thick, sweet Turkish brew they make on the West Bank. I'd deliberately not spent the night with him because I wanted to remember the Pilgerhaus and the way it had been. I walked up the steps from the street and told him not to fill the second cup. When he looked confused, I came much closer to him and gave him a kiss. He put his arms round me, the way he always did, but I got free.

"I'm leaving you," I told him. "I'm going."

I don't think he believed me. In fact, I know he didn't. He wanted to know where I was going. And why.

"It doesn't matter, Charlie. It's over. Don't try and find me. Don't phone. Just remember what we had, yeah?"

He was still staring at me. Nightmare.

I tried to smile and for just a second or two I wondered how I could soften the blow. Then I realised it was impossible.

So I kissed him again and left. Crossing the street outside I knew he'd be at the window, watching me, but I never looked back. Round the corner, as agreed, I phoned Avram.

"It's finished," I said.

I've always travelled light. Within an hour I'd packed two bags, settled the rent that I owed, and made my way to the bus station. Only that night, back on the Golan, did I fully appreciate what I'd done.

Yossi was out with the dog. We'd made a fire because it got cold at night and I was sitting on the floor, just staring at the flames. I tried to cry but the tears wouldn't come. I thought about phoning Charlie, about trying to explain why this was best for both of us, but I knew that would simply make things worse. I'd become that man's entire life. And now he was on his own.

Was I proud of myself? No. Did I regret the years we spent together? Never. Could it have ended any other way?

Probably not.

*

Charlie McGuigan

After being charged, I was taken to the remand wing at Wormwood Scrubs prison. There, I found myself in the hands of a Scottish psychiatrist who prescribed heavy doses of a tranquiliser I can't remember the name of.

The next few months passed me by. I shared a cell with an overweight black guy called Amos who was addicted to Heart FM. I spent a lot of time asleep, hiding from Cheryl Cole and George Ezra, occasionally shaken awake by the remand wing nurse who'd arrive with another paper cup of the pinkish, slightly sweet gloop that I was coming to rely on. Thinking about nothing can become strangely addictive.

My trial has to have been one of the shortest in living history. It took place at the Central Criminal Court in the New Year. My reappearance revived all last year's media hysteria and as the prison van swept down the ramp to the building's rear entrance, I was aware of a blur of lenses at the window.

My solicitor had retained a young QC who had his eye on the big time. We had a single meeting before we got to court, and I think he was disappointed that I didn't want to put up more of a fight. He urged me to think of the thousand ways that Hamas must have manipulated me. He questioned the deal I'd done with the CPS to simply plead guilty and refuse to answer any other questions, though he admitted that I'd probably earned myself a substantial reduction in sentence for being so co-operative in the interviews at Paddington Green.

He asked me again and again whether I wasn't prepared to talk about my years on the West Bank, the atrocities I'd seen in Gaza, the way the whole experience had stripped me bare, making me easy pickings for the likes of Mansour and the old man from Hebron. Again, I said no. This was a closed chapter in my life. On reflection I was glad that I hadn't blown anyone up, because I'd been wrong about meeting violence with violence, but the events of last year were no longer of interest to me. I'd got everything wrong, especially Sapir, and now I was ready for a bit of peace in my life.

The trial lasted less than a week. On security grounds, the prosecution declined to go into any real detail about the chain of events that had brought me to the dock. Their submission to the judge and to the jury was simple. I'd agreed to

wear a suicide vest in order to blow up David Sorenson. The operation had failed but I was no less culpable. Dead, I'd have been home and dry. Alive, I got fifteen years.

The first month I spent in Belmarsh, which is a high security prison in south east London. In every respect, it was horrible. I think they sent me there because the place was full of convicted terrorists. It fed the public's hunger for putting me in the right box, but it was a nice gesture, too, because someone up the line must have concluded that I believed in all the martyr shit.

Fellow prisoners, especially those from the Middle East, treated me as a bit of a celebrity. They all wanted to know who I'd met on the West Bank, who had recruited me, what kind of peace I'd made with myself when the time had come, but I'm afraid they went away as disappointed as my QC. There was also a visiting Imam, who asked me to pray with him, and a cook from the kitchens with a glass eye who visited my cell and asked me whether I had any special dietary requirements. He'd come for a look, I know he had, but then he surprised me by saying that his wife had read *Nakba* and really enjoyed it, and now that I'd met me in the flesh he was going to give the book a try. I wished him good luck. I had no special dietary requirements.

The second week I was at Belmarsh, I was approached in the dining hall by a screw who seemed to have taken a shine to me. He had a copy of the *Guardian*, folded open at page six, and he simply left it on the table beside my plate. A correspondent on the Left Bank reported a surprise release of Palestinian prisoners, all of them Hamas, from jails in Israel. Hamas had been pressing for this for years and now, for no good reason, it seemed to have happened. There were hundreds of these men, all of them facing indefinite sentences, and suddenly they were back home.

A couple of days later, another copy of the *Guardian*, same screw. This time the story was on the front page. After years of prevarication, the Israeli cabinet appeared to be on the point of accepting Hamas as partners in the peace process. The party they'd twice tried to destroy in Gaza had won themselves a place at the negotiating table. I looked at the shot of a smiling Khalid Mishal and thought of Gerry Adams. My father should have been around to see this. Yesterday's terrorist. Today's statesman.

After that first month I was quietly transferred to Ford open prison in West Sussex. It struck me as a humane gesture, especially in the light of my status – in some quarters – as the face of evil. By now I was more or less off the medication and at last I had access to a computer again. There are restrictions on prisoners sending e-mails, even in an Open Prison, but Carragh – bless her – had been to see me at Belmarsh and I decided to write my lovely daughter a series of letters.

That visit she'd made to Belmarsh hadn't gone well. I think the setting had frightened her. Ditto the state of her dad. She was also still struggling to come to terms with what I'd really been up to that day we'd met for tea at the Ritz, and it showed. I hadn't lied to her. Not directly. But I'd neglected to share the news that I was en route to blow Mr Sorenson apart and she found that hard to live with. Sins of omission. The worst kind.

The letters I wrote to Carragh were a godsend. They gave me the space and the opportunity to try and make sense of my time with Sapir. I'd tried to lock all that away. I'd tried to tell myself that I'd misread her signals, eight years of signals, that she'd been someone else the whole time, that she'd been acting out some kind of script, that she'd been playing a role that I'd been dumb enough to fall for, that she'd trapped me into a dependence that had left me utterly beached. *Does this sound likely to you, Carragh?* I wrote. *Or even credible?*

The answer came in person within a month. By now it was mid-summer. Carragh had scored the right "A" levels to get her uni place at Plymouth and was preparing for her new life in the south west. We met in the visitor's centre and I could tell at first glance that Carragh was relieved that this wasn't Belmarsh.

"There are cows, dad, across the road. Sheep. Big greenhouses. The whole deal. It's not a prison, it's a holiday camp."

She settled into the conversation. She looked fabulous, tanned and lean and happy. History and journalism, it turned out, hadn't been quite her thing. After a couple of career swerves she'd opted for doing a law degree. Under the circumstances I thought that was mildly ironic and said so. Journalists, I said, write the first draft of history. Historians tell them where they've gone wrong. While lawyers just get rich.

"Exactly, dad. I should write that down. Perfect."

"I'm disappointed with you."

"No, you're not. You're grinning."

"Don't change the subject. You make me very happy."

I asked her what she'd made of the letters I'd written. She said she'd been flattered.

"Flattered how?"

"Because you were so honest."

"There's no other way, Ka. Not from where I'm sitting."

"So, it's true? All of it?"

"Yes. As true as I can make it."

"And Sapir really was Hannah? In the book?"

"Yes."

"OK." She reached for my hand. "Just one question. May I?"

"Go ahead."

"Why not let it go?"

"What does that mean?"

"Forget the women. Pretend it never happened. She was what she was. You were what you were. It's gone. It's over. Today's another day. Am I wrong?"

"Not at all. You've nailed it completely. But what were we? Who was she? That's what I'm finding hard to get to terms with."

Carragh was right, of course. We talked about Sapir a little longer, but I could tell her heart wasn't in it. It turned out she had some news of her own. She was working in a gastropub in the village for the summer to save up for uni and she thought she'd fallen in love with the chef.

"What's his name?"

"She. Paula. She's Italian. Fabulous eyes. Fabulous everything."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty eight on Sunday. We're going to Venice to celebrate."

"Really?" I was looking at this daughter of mine with new respect. "And what does your mother say about all this?"

"She doesn't dad. You're the first to know."

For some reason that made me feel extremely good. My daughter wanted me, needed me, trusted me. With full remission I would be out in seven years. Would this lovely couple be living together by then? A little retreat in the Tuscan hills? Winter visits? Warm glasses of chianti by the roaring log fire?

I put my hand on hers, earning a shake of the head from a nearby screw. I knew a little Italian.

“Congratulazioni,” I said. *“Va bene.”*

I enjoyed that summer at Ford Prison. I was working outside as a gardener, and I got a tan. Pretty much any booze you wanted came in through a hole in the fence from an off-licence in Littlehampton and there was a surprising variety of company. My regular after-dinner companion was a defrocked priest from the Isle of Sheppey. I never discovered what had put him behind bars, but he was excellent company, widely read, and liked a decent Rioja almost as much as I did. Life, after my brief tussle with martyrdom, was sweet. I was protected. I was reasonably well fed. And I had all the time in the world to try and make sense of my life.

Then came the moment when everything, once again, fell apart. It was a Tuesday, October, a full year since I'd slipped on the suicide vest in room 235 and headed out for my last day on earth. A summons took me to the Governor's office. He was a kind man, impressively open-minded, and did his best to put the right opportunities our way.

He sat me down and told me I had a visitor.

“My daughter again? Carragh?”

“No. He's a copper. CID. I gather you've met already.”

“What's his name?”

“Steve Fairfax. He's a D/I.”

Fairfax was waiting for me in an office down the corridor. He looked a great deal older, maybe thinner, than when we'd last met. He invited me to sit down.

“Some good news,” he said at once. “You're a free man.”

“What?”

“They're letting you go.”

“Why? How come?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you. Let’s call it a prisoner exchange.”

“But I’m guilty. You know that. I did it. I tried to kill the man, Sorenson. That was me. That’s why I’m here.”

“Sure. But maybe it wasn’t as simple as that.”

“How? How can that work? You’re telling me I wasn’t wearing the vest? You’re telling me it wouldn’t have worked?”

“I’ve no idea. It was voice activated, remember? And without the word, we’ll never be able to tell.”

I nodded. In less than a minute we seemed to be back in the interview room at Paddington Green. Except my precious word, my precious secret, no longer seemed so important.

Fairfax hadn’t lost his touch. He knew exactly what I was thinking.

“You want to tell me the word?”

“Here? Now?”

“Yes.”

“I might. Would it make any difference?”

“Yes. Not a lot, but yes.”

“A difference how?”

“You went down for attempted murder. The assumption was that you were acting for a terrorist organisation, namely Hamas.”

“And?”

“That might not have been the whole picture.”

“Might not?”

“It wasn’t.”

“And you’ve proved that? Without the word?”

“Yes.”

“So who sent me to London? Who was Mansour? And who was the old man at the Travelodge?”

Fairfax shook his head. Regrettably he wasn’t in a position to tell me. Did I remember the guy on the bench on Hampstead Heath who nicked my phone?

“Yes.”

“And the American couple you bumped into in the pub?”

“Yes.”

“And the guy who checked you out at Merrist House before you went up?
Called himself Josh?”

“Yes.”

“They were all part of it,” he paused. “None of this is attributable, Charlie, and if it ever comes back, I’ll deny it all. But are you getting the picture here?”

I nodded. Of course, I was. The Israelis. Mossad. Heading off Hamas. So fucking obvious.

“You still want the word?”

“Yes, please.”

“It’s *Sheikh-Eid*.”

“It’s what?”

“*Sheikh-Eid*. It was a mosque close to the Wailing Wall. Sapir’s father showed me the site. The Israelis bulldozed it to make a plaza in ’67. Levelled the whole quarter. One old lady wouldn’t leave her house. Her family had been there for generations.”

“And?”

“They bulldozed her, too.”

“She died?”

“Of course.”

“As you would have done?”

“That was the plan.”

“Conscience, then? On your part?”

“Despair. Much simpler.”

Fairfax was still looking at the word, rolling it round his mouth, trying it out. When I asked what was going to happen next, he folded the paper into his pocket and glanced at his watch.

“You clear your locker. You say your goodbyes. And then I take you to lunch.”

“Just like that?”

“Not quite.” He reached into his briefcase and produced a thick white envelope.

“What’s that?”

“It’s three thousand pounds in fifties. You’ll be getting this every month for the rest of your life. Index-linked, of course.”

“How? Why?”

“Don’t ask.”

I cleared my locker. I said my goodbyes. My whisky priest took both my hands in his and wished me good luck. He said God always looked after those he loves, and he was glad I was home safe.

Home safe?

Steve Fairfax was waiting for me in the visitors’ car park and a minute or so later we’d cleared the exit barrier and we were out on the road. I settled back, the sun on my face. An Irish shamrock in a pendant hung from the rear-view mirror.

“Where are we going?”

“Lunch. I told you.”

“But where?”

“West Wittering.”

I’d never been to West Wittering in my life. It was half an hour’s drive away. Steve said he knew a little place overlooking the beach that served decent fish. It also had a licence. I was gazing at him. There was a question I badly wanted to ask.

“Why are you going to all this trouble?”

“Because you got fucked over.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And it doesn’t end there, believe me.”

“So where does it end?”

He shook his head. Wouldn’t say.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No.”

“Ever?”

“No.”

We were in West Wittering by now. The tide was out, and the sun gleamed on the wet sand. Breakwaters stretched as far as the eye could see and I could hear the distant yelp of a dog splashing around in the shallows.

Steve pulled into the car park and nodded at the restaurant.

"In you go," he said.

"Aren't you coming?"

"No." He'd produced a baguette from his briefcase. "*Bon appetit.*"

I stared at him, suddenly uncomfortable. For a year I'd led a life without surprises. Now this.

"Get in there," he said. "Just do it."

And so I did. I had no idea what awaited me. Had he phoned Carragh? Roz? Was this some kind of family reunion, kissing and making up after all these years? Had he squared some journo away? Promising him an exclusive? Or was this my editor from *Solstice* who'd sent me a solitary Christmas card and hoped that all was well?

The restaurant, like the beach, was empty. I hung by the door for a moment, looking around. She had her back to me. I didn't recognise her at first. Then she turned and smiled. She had a tiny baby in her arms, and she was rocking it back and forth.

Sapir.

I didn't know what to do. I've no idea whether Steve had briefed the waitress or not, but I felt the lightest pressure on my arm as she coaxed me across the room. Sapir was sitting by the window. The baby was squinting, the sun in his eyes. He had spiky black hair and a pink smudge of a face. Back in Belfast I'd seen photos of me looking like that.

"What's his name?" It was the best I could manage.

"Shimon."

"Shimon as in Simon?"

"Shimon as in Simon Peter."

"How old is he?"

"Three months."

I did the sums. Then I looked down at him, offered him a finger to suck. The Pilgerhaus, I thought.

“Mine?”

“Ours.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“You’re here for good? Both of you?”

“We’re here for lunch. All three of us. Then we have to go.”

“We?”

“Me and the baby.”

“Go where?”

“Back to Israel.” She smiled up at me. “Where I belong.”
