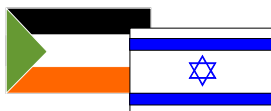


— THE —  
**JERUSALEM  
CONSPIRACY**



# One

***Sunday, 3:30 p.m.***

The Peugeot station wagon slipped off the main highway onto the dirt road. A man and woman sat in the front seat. A passenger sat in the back seat keeping watch out the rear window to make sure they weren't being followed. The car bobbed up and down, following the hard-packed dirt and gravel surface for a few kilometers. At an unmarked hill they turned left and continued to zigzag for another half-kilometer following the tire tracks that indicated they had found the right route. The terrain looked more like the surface of the moon than a traditional desert. Gray, rocky foothills almost hugged each other, limiting the driver's vision to barely one hundred meters in any direction.

In a sheltered area hidden between two small barren mounds, the dusty car stopped. The occupants silently got out. The men were wearing blue jeans, T-shirts, and running shoes. The woman had on a dark skirt and loose-fitting blouse. Her thick eye make-up and long, red fingernails seemed out of place in the desert.

The passenger opened the hatch of the station wagon, removed two large green duffel bags and carried them to where the driver and the woman were waiting. Glancing at the couple, he sensed their relationship had already developed well beyond the operation they were rehearsing. He frowned, then quickly looked away, not wanting the driver to see his disapproval. It was wrong to have such a beautiful woman involved for many reasons. Yet, he was in no position to protest. The driver knelt down, unzipped one of the bags and pulled out three M-16 rifles. The black hand rests of the semi-automatic weapons glimmered in the late afternoon sunlight.

At the same time, the passenger unzipped the second duffel bag and pulled out a large cardboard placard on a wooden post — a grinning

portrait of the overconfident president of Palestine, Jibril Abu Alim. He ran fifty paces straight ahead of the small group into the lengthening shadows, and pounded the post into the hard dirt with a large rock. He returned, and the driver handed him a rifle, motioning for him to take his position on the hill behind and to the left. The woman quickly paced off sixty meters to the right. Her long, wavy black hair was lifted by the warm desert breeze as she jogged.

The driver took his position and paused to glance up at the blue sky. He thought he heard a sound in the distance and quickly brought his index finger to his lips demanding quiet. The thick desert air pressed silently against his eardrums. Nothing. He took a deep breath and sensed a wisp of moisture — the long hot summer was over. He loved this desert. It was so peaceful. Then anger welled up inside him as he realized how much violence there would have to be before peace would finally come to the land. The driver slowly lifted the M-16 to his shoulder and snapped the lock to automatic. He aimed, waited a moment and nodded. The desert silence exploded with the roar of automatic weapon fire and the signpost flew out of the ground.

The passenger ran to retrieve the target and brought it back to the car. The other two already had the engine running ready to go. He threw his M-16 into the open duffel bag in the trunk, zipped it up and slammed down the hatch. He slid into the back seat and shut the door as the Peugeot roared away, shooting out loose stones and gravel from under the spinning tires. He pulled out the placard and pushed it over the front seat so they could all see it. The driver smiled: Abu Alim's face was blown away.

## Two

### ***Sunday, 7:00 p.m.***

“Excuse me dear,” said a plump elderly woman with silver-gray hair carrying an oversized handbag, “but I believe you’re in my seat... and I asked specifically for an aisle seat because I have a weak bladder.” Rachel still lost in a daydream, laid her book in her lap and stared absently up at the lady standing beside her.

“*Nu?*” she persisted, “it says right here on my boarding pass ‘21-C.’ Should I call the stewardess? Stewardess! Stewardess!”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’m sure I’m the one in the wrong seat,” Rachel said unbuckling her seat belt. “I’m sorry. I’m a little distracted. I didn’t check my seat number.” Rachel opened her purse to look for her own boarding pass and momentarily panicked when she didn’t feel her gun. Then she remembered that the check-in attendant insisted she put the handgun in her checked baggage — “airline regulations.”

“Yes, here it is,” said Rachel. “You’re right, I’m 21-B.” She slipped her slender frame into the middle seat, and the old lady wedged herself in beside her.

“No need to be nervous, dear. First trip to Israel?” She didn’t wait for a response. “I always travel El Al. They never have any security problems. Pooh, pooh, pooh. We’re in good hands — don’t worry.”

Rachel forced a smile and picked up her book. “Thanks,” she said, hoping the book would be an effective escape from the endless verbal onslaught she expected.

“My granddaughter’s getting married in Jerusalem. The King David Hotel, no less. If you’re not busy Thursday afternoon you just *have* to come to the wedding. He’s an Israeli boy. A few of my friends say to watch out that he’s not marrying her just to get a Green Card. Some of them do that, you know.” Rachel smiled and nodded, then

retreated back into her daydream as the lady chattered on. The woman could not know the change her words had made in Rachel's heartbeat.

*"That's where they're going to build our new home," said Ari pointing to the barren windswept hill. Rachel looked up into Ari's dark brown eyes; in them she saw a mixture of purposefulness, intensity and caring. Those eyes promised her a future that no house in the Judean desert ever could.*

*"Look, look at it. Isn't it beautiful? The prophet Amos walked through these hills. Abraham and Sarah drove their flocks across this land." Ari was lost in an age long past.*

*Rachel turned to look. It took her breath away. "What did I ever do to deserve all of this?" she asked Ari. "Not only is it the promise of the promised land come true," she continued with emotion, "but it's my own dream and our dream come true as well."*

*Every day since her Bat Mitzvah she had prayed fervently that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would bring the Jewish people back from the four corners of the earth, back to the land of her people. "It's not just a national home," she remembered her father explaining to her as a little girl, "but Eretz Yisrael — the Land — belongs to the Almighty Himself. He has entrusted it to the Jewish people to build a model nation on it based on the values of our Holy Torah."*

*As a teenager, Rachel had joined the protests outside the Soviet embassy in Toronto to free Soviet Jewry. She was a precocious child who was fearless when it came to standing up for the rights of her people. She spent her summers at a religious Zionist camp in upstate New York and became fluent in Hebrew. After high school, she spent a year at a women's seminary in Jerusalem. It was during that year that she met Ari, who was also a yeshiva student.*

*"When they finish building our new subdivision of Ma'alot Yair, there will be more than seven hundred families — that's over three thousand people. Not bad for a 'settlement.' There was always a tone of pride in Ari's voice when he talked about Ma'alot Yair. His family was involved in its inception shortly after the 1967 Six-Day War. In those days it really was a settlement of mobile homes placed east of the ceasefire line in empty, disputed territory between Israel and Jordan. Today, as the Israelis and Palestinians were negotiating its future status*

*as part of the Oslo Accords, it was a bustling village with Mediterranean-style villas, manicured gardens, schools and public parks.*

*“Oh! I almost forgot,” she exclaimed, reaching into her purse, “your engagement present!” Ari smiled at his bride-to-be. The contrast of his white teeth against his olive skin was dazzling. He took the package from Rachel’s slender fingers. “I hope you like it,” she said filling the silence as he unwrapped the gift. Out here on the barren hill tops far away from the noise of the city you could almost touch the stillness.*

“So, do you think they’re all like that?” asked the lady. “By the way, my name is Klein, Millie Klein. Nice to meet you.”

Rachel snapped out of her dream knowing Mrs. Klein was unaware that she had totally tuned her out. “Are all whom like what?” Rachel asked, her mind still lingering on Ari.

“Are all Israeli boys just out to marry American girls so they can get a Green Card and leave Israel? You know, I belong to a Hadassah women’s group, and we helped build that country. It’s terrible that all those young Israeli people are leaving just to make a little more money in America.”

“I was once engaged to an Israeli boy,” said Rachel quietly.

“We must have raised hundreds of millions of dollars since 1948 to build hospitals, factories, and schools,” Mrs. Klein chattered on, “and this is the thanks we get? They really think life is better in America...?” Mrs. Klein stopped mid-sentence and turned to Rachel as if seeing her for the first time. “What do you mean ‘once engaged’? Is everything all right, dear? Here, let me give you an orange — you don’t look so well. A skinny thing like you.” She reached into her overstuffed handbag and pulled out a piece of fruit. “Let me peel it for you, dear.”

*“It’s exactly what I wanted!” laughed Ari. “A gold Shabbat watch. But you didn’t have to spend so much on me. It must be so expensive. We could have used the money to buy something for the apartment.” Ari was always practical and thinking ahead. You had to be, to survive in the Middle East.*

*“Don’t be so up tight,” said Rachel, brushing back her windblown auburn hair. “This watch belonged to my grandfather. It was the only thing left from Austria, and my grandmother brought it with her to Canada after the war. She gave it to me to give to you. She’s hoping that some day we’ll*

*name a son after my Zaidie, and the watch will be passed down to him."*

*"Rachel, I love you," Ari said. His voice reflected the growing bond between them. He looked deeply into Rachel's light brown eyes that matched her hair. The delicately sculptured features of her face and smooth complexion required no make-up. She had the kind of beauty that might go unnoticed at first glance, but became more attractive each time Ari looked at her. There was a purity in her face that allowed her spirit to shine through. "The watch is beautiful, Rachel, but I'm not going to wear it while I'm on reserve duty. It might get lost or broken while I'm on maneuvers."*

*"Well, at least try it on," she insisted disappointedly. Ari strapped the watch to his wrist.*

*"It really is exquisite," she said, "but I have to admit it looks a little silly with your army uniform."*

*"Well, I'm certainly not going to scratch it up before the wedding." He took off the watch, put it back into the case, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. "Let's go, or we'll be late for our meeting with the caterer."*

*They got into the white Subaru and sped off down a one-lane road past a number of small Arab villages. Rachel was always tense traveling down this back road leading from the settlement of Ma'alot Yair to the main road to Jerusalem. Even during daylight hours there was a sense of quiet foreboding. During the last few months a number of Israeli cars had been stoned by Palestinians nearby, and a Molotov cocktail had damaged a settler's vehicle. Luckily no one had been hurt in those incidents. Rachel clutched her handbag as they chatted about the details of the wedding.*

*Ari made a sharp right turn when they reached the Jerusalem junction just outside Bethlehem. A hundred meters after the turn they heard a loud thud as a large boulder smashed into the roof of the Subaru. Rachel let out a scream. She felt a lump in her throat and her heart was pounding heavily. Ari instinctively swerved the car and sped up to avoid any more rocks that might be thrown at the car. His front left tire struck a large, sharp stone in the middle of the road. The tire began to lose air, pulling the vehicle to the right. He yanked the steering wheel to the left against the tug of the flat tire. He continued*

*driving for a few hundred meters down the road until he felt they were out of danger.*

*“Are you all right?” he asked Rachel.*

*Even though stoning had become commonplace, it was still a terrifying experience. Thousands of incidents had taken place since the beginning of the Intifada; the six-year violent uprising of the Palestinians against the Israeli occupation of the disputed territories. A rock crashing through the windshield of a car traveling ninety kilometers per hour could be lethal. Rachel gathered her wits. “I’m okay,” she answered quietly.*

*The car came to a stop near some Arab-owned shops. “I’m going into that furniture store to call for help. I don’t want to be changing the tire out in the open, by myself on this road,” Ari said. “I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t leave the car.” He turned quickly away.*

Tears welled up in Rachel’s eyes. For years this nightmare had repeated itself over and over in her imagination. She felt as if she were lost in a trance that she couldn’t get out of.

“Are you sure you’re all right dear?” asked Mrs. Klein. “He didn’t hurt you did he? You know how rotten men can be. Don’t worry, sweetie, a beautiful thing like you, they’ll be lining up after you. So what happened — did he break it off?”

Rachel swallowed hard. Over the years she had learned to hold back — to reveal information only when necessary. “No, it’s nothing like that,” she said quietly. “Let’s just say it wasn’t meant to be.”

*It all happened so fast. Ari ran across the street with his hand pressed against the pistol tucked under his belt. He glanced back at Rachel and disappeared through the open doorway. Suddenly, a beige station wagon screeched up to the curb in front of the store. A man with a red kefiyah wrapped around his face jumped out of the car. Rachel gasped, “Oh my God! Ari!”*

*The Palestinian ran into the store. Seconds later, an old man came running out, waving his hands wildly and yelling in Arabic.*

*Rachel was frantic. Should she get out of the car? Stay inside? Drive away? She slid into the driver’s seat and clamped her hands onto the steering wheel. Moments later the Palestinian came running out of the store stooped over,*



*clutching his left hand, dripping blood. The station wagon started moving even before he could get in. He lunged for the door and fell into the passenger seat just as the car sped away.*

Even now, Rachel still couldn't bring herself to talk about Ari's murder. She was told by the army authorities that he had put up a valiant struggle, but that didn't help her find meaning in his senseless death. "Why Ari?" she kept asking herself. The Prime Minister had said, "This was an act of the enemies of the peace process." How did the Prime Minister know that? Maybe this was an act against the Jews. After all, before the Palestinian slaughtered her fiancé, did he ask Ari if he was for or against the peace process?

Rachel's initial anger and confusion had evolved into a sadness that permeated her every action, but her tradition taught her that everything happens for a reason. Events, big or small, good or bad, were opportunities to exercise one's free will, to choose greatness or to give up in defeat. Rachel had decided that it was time to stop mourning and start growing. She was on her way to tie up the loose ends of the past and start building a future. Her grandmother in Toronto had persuaded her to go back to Israel and continue pursuing her dreams. Rachel wanted her own family. She wanted to be part of building the State of Israel, and she wanted the terrorist who murdered Ari brought to justice.

"Don't worry dear, time brings wounds and heals them," said Mrs. Klein quoting a favorite Yiddish proverb. Rachel was a jumble of emotions. She was excited about coming back to Israel, yet her excitement was tempered by the churning in her stomach that she felt every time she replayed the attack in her mind. Her anxiety was compounded by not having the gun she had been carrying since Ari's murder. The innocent twinkle in Mrs. Klein's eyes had a calming effect on Rachel. She even reminded her a little of her own grandmother. It might not be so terrible to spend the remaining ten hours next to her. It might even be therapeutic.

"You know, my *Bubbie* says that all the time," said Rachel, thoughtfully. "Maybe I will have some of that orange after all. Is it a Jaffa?"

# Three

## ***Thursday, 10:00 a.m.***

Yigal Ramon picked up the bullet-riddled poster lying on the large conference table in front of him. “Whoever did this is certainly not a friend of the new president of Palestine,” he said dryly.

The operations room of the *Shabak* Jerusalem branch was quiet as the two officers standing beside the table waited for their boss, Yigal, to continue. *Shabak*, also known as the *Shin Bet*, is a Hebrew acronym for General Security Services, the Israeli version of the American FBI. “What kind of weapon was used?” He fingered the holes that had eradicated Jibril Abu Alim’s portrait.

“An M-16,” answered one of the officers.

“And where exactly did you find this poster?”

“About one kilometer north of the Ma’alot Yair settlement.”

Yigal looked up at the men standing around the table. They looked like two plainclothes security men at an El Al check-in counter. Both were in their early thirties and just under six feet tall — fit but not muscular. Udi Harel was blond with deep brown eyes and severe good looks. Amiram Barr was dark and Mediterranean looking. Yigal spoke quietly, “Was he a Jew or an Arab?”

Silence.

“*Nu?* What’s the identity of our assassin-in-training?”

Udi cleared his throat. “We’re not exactly sure, Yigal. But based on the bullet casings we found, there was more than one M-16 fired. It looks like there were three people in the group, unless one of them fired two M-16s.”

Yigal took off his glasses and rubbed his forehead. He explored his receding and thinning hairline with his right index finger. Middle age was catching up with Yigal. This was further emphasized by a small

paunch developing around his mid-section. His men knew this gesture meant he did not feel in control. “Do you have any ideas?” Yigal asked pensively.

“There’s a good chance they’re part of a new Jewish underground,” said Amiram. “The Arabs usually carry AK-47s. Although there have been a number of our soldiers who had their M-16s stolen in the last few months.”

The term ‘Arab’ was back in common use since the establishment of the Palestinian State, referring to Israeli Arabs. The government did not want to confuse them with their cousins across the border, although the Israeli Arabs continued to call themselves Palestinians.

Yigal drummed his fingers on the table distractedly. “Do the Palestinians know about this yet?”

“We don’t think so.”

“Good,” he said standing up. “Keep it quiet. If they find out they’ll milk it for all it’s worth. They’ll claim it’s an Israeli government conspiracy and bring the UN down on us. For all we know it could just be a few Jewish settlement kids out having fun.” Yigal handed the shot-up poster to Amiram. “Just find out who’s doing this — and fast — before the media get onto it,” he ordered.

“Yigal,” said Udi. “Rachel Stein is back.”

Yigal stopped, and stared at Udi. His eyes narrowed. “Since when?”

“Four days.”

“That’s all I need now,” said Yigal throwing up his hands. He opened the door and turned back, exasperated, to face Udi. “Find out what she’s up to. I want a full report by the end of the week.”