

BLIND MISSION

By AVICHAH (AVI) SCHMIDT

Translated by Ilan Chaim

In memory of my beloved parents,

Malka and Max Schmidt

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The heavy haze that had cloaked the city at first light gradually began to lift. As if in a developing photograph, the skyline slowly emerged to reveal the buildings of Tel Aviv. In the distance a car's engine could be heard coughing into life, joined by the metallic screech of heavy doors being dragged ajar at some early opening business.

A sharp, almost painfully cold gust of wind penetrated his lungs as he left the warmth of the car. The unexpected cold made him huddle into himself. He glanced at his watch and saw it was 7:15; another 45 minutes to wait. He walked over to a café on the corner and was greeted by pleasant warmth on his face as he pushed open the heavy glass door.

A waiter with coiffed hair meticulously combed to the side, a fresh white towel draped casually over his left arm, came over to him.

"Coffee with cream," the man said curtly, seating himself by the large corner window facing the street. The waiter, whose every step seemed to reflect his ownership of the premises, retreated behind the counter. A few moments later he returned, expressionlessly bearing a tray with a cup of fragrant coffee. From the next table he took a simple metal container holding packets of sugar and artificial sweeteners, and placed them before the man.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No, thanks." The feeling of warmth that had spread through his limbs with a relaxing pleasantness a few moments ago had now become unbearably oppressive. He pulled open the zipper of his windbreaker and patted the inside pocket. Taking a sip of his coffee with one hand, he reached with the other into the pocket and withdrew a slip of paper, spreading it open on the table. He studied it carefully, with puzzlement.

The name and address of the company at whose offices he had the appointment were unfamiliar to him. As much as he had tried, he could not figure out a logical explanation of the name of the commercial firm known as AGT, Ltd. Not even the head of marketing at his own company knew more than he; although he thought a firm with that name traded in building materials.

In any event, that was a secondary question. The truly important fact was that the company – whatever its business was – was seriously considering replacing all the old elevators in its building with the fast, silent ones he sold.

Somewhere between the espresso machine and the cash register an old black telephone rang shrilly, breaking his train of thought. He gazed over at a dusty wall clock and noticed its hand indicated 10 minutes to eight.

As one who subscribed to the first rule of business – namely that the customer must not be kept waiting – he got up, taking a five-shekel coin from his pocket and placing it beside the ash tray. He stepped quickly past the empty tables towards the door.

"Mr. Greenberg?" He jerked his head at the sound of his name. He wondered how the waiter knew his name, and what he wanted. For a split second, he asked himself if he had met the man previously, on another occasion, but he could not recall one. The man stood there, an apathetic look on his face, one hand holding the telephone receiver and the other covering the mouthpiece. He beckoned with a nod of his head for him to come over.

"Yes, what is it?" Greenberg demanded as he walked over to the counter.

"Phone call for you," said the waiter, holding the receiver out over a tray piled with glasses.

“For me?!” Greenberg exclaimed. Certain that it was some kind of misunderstanding, he took the instrument. For an instant he wondered whether it was possible for someone he knew to locate him here, in this café; then just as quickly rejected the idea.

But the voice on the phone had asked for him by name; there was no mistake.

“Who is this? Who’s speaking?”

The voice ignored the question. “I’m waiting for you in the white car by the delicatessen across the street,” it said, cutting off the call with no opportunity for clarification or argument.

The call left him amazed and puzzled. His mind raced trying to analyze the strange event logically; but in vain. In a daze he reached across the counter and returned the receiver, mumbling his thanks to the waiter. The latter, busy clearing dishes from one of the tables, did not notice.

Greenberg resumed his progress towards the door, then stopped and thought. A bit self-consciously, he retraced his steps and went over to the window, spread apart two slats of the venetian blind with a finger and peered out suspiciously.

About 50 meters up the street, on the opposite side, he saw the car. A man was sitting at the wheel. Almost instinctively, without knowing why, he took out his pack of cigarettes and a pen and wrote down the car’s license number. Only then did he go out.

Glancing left and right, he crossed the street diagonally through the lanes of now mounting traffic. The driver of the big American car waiting for him watched his progress from behind the mirrored lenses of aviator sunglasses. Greenberg approached the car, bending over to carefully look inside. A cellular telephone resting on its bracket between the front seats explained the source of the phone call to the cafe. A second device, a radio transmitter, was mounted under the glove compartment.

The driver lowered the electric window. “Your cell phone was off so I called the café. We’re AGT, Ltd.,” he said, reaching across and pushing open the passenger door. Without another word, he moved back in his seat, waiting.

PART ONE

1.

The private telephone in the home of Israel's prime minister rang for a second time. Moshe Lapid lifted his eyes from the file he was reading and impatiently gestured with his right hand. One of his two permanently assigned bodyguards rose from his chair on the other side of the large study. Silently resting his weapon on the telephone table, he lifted the receiver. He spoke briefly with the prime minister's personal secretary, then strode quickly across the room and waited motionlessly behind the premier's shoulder. Only after he looked up from his text did the guard lean forward and say quietly, "The foreign minister is on the line, sir."

The elderly leader shuddered slightly and with a gentle nod of thanks to the guard lifted the receiver from the extension on his desk.

The voice on the other end, sounding a bit hoarse and more than a little disappointed, said: "The resolution passed. It's received final approval."

"Come here at once," was the premier's curt reply.

"Yes, sir," said the foreign minister. The call ended.

The prime minister collapsed back into his chair. The unceasing tension of recent months had left its mark on him. A terrible fatigue gripped him, and if not for the presence of his guards, he would gladly have put his head down for a quick nap. His health had deteriorated over the past six months, and had become a constant focus of media attention. He now needed all his strength just in order to think. He suddenly lunged forward in his chair and punched a button on his desk console. "Get me Michael!" he said forcefully.

About half an hour later, near midnight, two large American cars from the cabinet fleet drew up before the corner on Jerusalem's Balfour Street. Four tall security men, wearing identical navy blazers and beige slacks, jumped from the cars. Each carried an attaché case containing a submachine gun with a folding stock, and the cut of their jackets did not conceal the bulges over their right hips where their service automatics rested.

Using powerful flashlights, two of the guards quickly combed the surrounding area, while their two partners waited with one hand poised on the open doors of the cars, whose motors were still running. They were kept running, even after the all-clear was given. The two ministers – foreign and defense – were escorted from the cars and up the stone steps at the entrance to the house. Two of the guards closed the gate after themselves, as their two partners remained standing outside on the street. About 10 seconds later they disappeared into the cars, whose searchlights were now turned off and engines stilled, restoring the neighborhood to its previous quiet.

Inside the house, one of the armed guards held open the door to the prime minister's study, as the house matron wheeled in a cart laden with sandwiches and thermoses of coffee. The guards waited for the woman to finish arranging the food on a small table beside the white marble fireplace, then followed her out of the room. The prime minister and his two most senior ministers were alone.

Defense Minister Michael Almog, a beer-bellied man with the energy of someone much younger, volunteered to pour the steaming, aromatic brew into china cups without being asked. The old man with the sagging, gray, and sickly face sitting on the other side of the massive mahogany desk drew one of the cups towards him and dropped in a pill of artificial sweetener.

“What exactly happened?” the prime minister began, without preamble, looking at Foreign Minister Meir Gilat.

“As I already told you on the phone,” the diplomat paused to clear his throat, “the vote in the American Congress ended about an hour ago. The resolution passed; with a tiny majority, but it passed.”

A heavy silence fell over the room. The news that the American Congress had resolved to support the creation of a Palestinian state in the territories it said Israel should relinquish to the Radical Front for the Liberation of Palestine, headed by George Abu-Hatra – even though expected, was a shock.

The foreign minister sighed deeply, breaking the silence. “To my regret, we could not prevent it.”

“Why?” demanded the prime minister of his chief rival in the party.

The minister, known for weighing his words before speaking, thought for a moment and seemed to hesitate: “In this particular instance, we did not even try. We were precluded from trying.”

After considering this for a moment, the prime minister nodded in agreement. He well understood that an attempt to carry out an information campaign aimed at persuading members of Congress to vote one way or another would have been interpreted as an effort to frustrate any chance for peace in advance. It would have been a bad move.

“What the hell’s going on here?!” the prime minister suddenly shouted, the pent-up fury of his outburst seeming to express the country’s frustration at recent events. Despite the heavy pressure put on the administration via the American Jewish lobby, it appeared that Israel had more than enough cause for concern: the cutting of economic aid almost to the minimum, the cessation of trade under the threat of an appeal to the Security Council for an international economic embargo, the withholding of arms already paid for, the decision to supply advanced pilotless aircraft to Saudi Arabia, and the signing of the arms contracts with Jordan, Iran and the Saudis – the seemingly endless list was an abundantly clear indication that the good old days were history.

“I don’t understand what has caused the American president to shamelessly abandon the commitments of his predecessors,” the prime minister continued in angry bewilderment.

“And his blatant interference in our internal affairs doesn’t bother you? Asked the foreign minister. “The way he defames our part - -“

“What are you talking about?! The defense minister cut him off. “That’s what bothers you? This is the man who has explicitly declared that we must return the Golan Heights, dismantle the settlements, let half a million or more Palestinians move back to Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Haifa, and Acre and even ‘return’ Jerusalem!”

“Even ‘return’ Jerusalem,” signed the prime minister, shaking his head.

For some time it had been understood in Israel and abroad that a sharp turning point had occurred in the U.S.-Israel relations; but no one understood why. There were those who claimed that President Stewart Douglas thought he could permit himself this, now that his country was the only superpower left in the world. The Soviet Union had collapsed and desperately needed U.S. aid. And there were also those who said that, moreover, the president no longer feared the

Jewish lobby; not just because the Moslems had accumulated appreciable power, but also because some of Israel's actions had not been well received by American Jews. Nevertheless, the question remained not only how had it happened that the president was acting against Israel, but why? The answer was a difficult one and not unequivocal.

"It appears that Douglas is determined to impose a new order in the world," suggested the foreign minister, rubbing his forehead. "It seems that winning this vote in Congress—just as winning the previous ones—was especially important to him. These are the first foreign policy decisions he has made. Losing a vote would have pulled the rug from under him and made it difficult for him to function in the future."

"Let's get to the point," said Michael Almog, shifting in his chair. "After all, we've been here before. What is the practical implication of this latest congressional resolution?"

"Very simple: The United States will force us to meet with Abu-Hatra, to sit at the negotiating table with him and sign this horrendous agreement, despite everything we have said on the matter."

"And what if we refuse?" asked the defense minister significantly.

The foreign minister shot a murderous glance at his colleague. "I would not even consider thinking about it. In our present state of relations with the administration, the damage it would surely cause us would be inestimable."

A painful silence enveloped the room, as each of the three considered his own thoughts. Two months before, when the proposal for "reaching a Declaration of Principles on Palestinian autonomy with the participation of the leader of the Radical Front for the Liberation of Palestine" was first raised, no one had taken it seriously. The American assistant secretary of state, who had come up with the idea, almost paid for it with his career. After all, each Israeli government had declared again and again that it would "never agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel as long as it refused to recognize the state of Israel as a sovereign and Jewish state."

Nevertheless, the deterioration in U.S.-Israeli relations, which was especially painful on the economic plane, was accompanied by the open support of the American secretary of state for his assistant; and unlike in the past, a wave of fierce and bitter reactions from Israel could not put an end to the unwanted initiative. Just the opposite: The American president himself had bluntly declared that he, too, supports "the innovative and welcome ideas." Leaks, perhaps from above, said the administration had agreed with the Abu-Hatra organization to demand that the Israeli Arabs of the Galilee be permitted to decide whether to include that region in negotiations for a future settlement.

This was a red line which no one had thought the U.S. would cross. The world was amazed. For weeks the subject remained in the headlines. Reactions were mixed, but the general tendency of most nations was to accept the Americans' view—after all, wasn't the U.S. Israel's "friend and ally?"—and not least because, simply put, they were fed up with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Jewish world had suffered a deep shock, and there were those who saw this as a sign of the collapse of the special relationship that had lasted dozens of years between Israel and the United States. Others drew a more far-reaching conclusion. "The destruction of the Third Commonwealth, no less catastrophic than the destruction of the first two temples," was how the Israeli ambassador defined it to President Douglas, as he presented him with Israel's protest.

The Israeli government maintained official silence; except for the protest note to the president, nothing was done or said. While innumerable stormy meetings were held in Jerusalem,

some of them long into the night, no consensus was reached and no decisions were taken. As they had done more than once in the past, the Israelis preferred to bury their heads in the sand; deciding only not to decide for the time being. But now the situation was much more serious: the U.S. decision about the three-way summit, including its support for the Arab position that Israel should limit immigration, symbolized a political upheaval of ominous significance.

Finally, the prime minister broke the silence. "I see no way, other than to prepare for a long and extremely difficult struggle. The Americans' recent decisions are not merely a blatant and grave violation of the strategic balance of the region, but primarily a violation of the political balance. I have no doubt that they have agreed, in effect, to the destruction of Israel; at least as we have known it to this day."

Meir Gilat weighed his response. "We must send another message to the American president, in which we do not conceal our deep concern at the dangers being created in the region. We should also show our disappointment at the administration's decision to support the agreement with the head of a terrorist organization that still hasn't abandoned its call for Israel's destruction, let alone refuses to recognize Israel's basic right to exist."

"That's all?"

"For the moment, I would not propose a stronger response. Under the present situation, we simply cannot permit ourselves to give the administration a pretext for a further cut in aid. Our relations with the U.S. are already in a state of crisis the likes of which we've never seen."

"What do you think, Michael?"

The defense minister worriedly ran his thick fingers back through his silvery hair. Almost half a minute lapsed before he replied. "We are facing a very grave danger. It seems to me that the peace initiative they are trying to force on us this time has much more serious ramifications than the actual supply of sophisticated equipment to hostile countries. The consistent support for the radical positions of the Arabs does not augur well for us at this stage and under existing circumstances. There is only one course of action that seems to me to be practical. I regret it's the only way..."

* * *

It was nearly 02:30, but the prime minister of Israel continued to pace his study restlessly. The unprecedented decision taken by the inner cabinet of three would probably rob him of sleep for days to come. No detail of that decision must ever be revealed.

Sighing deeply, he reached for the phone.

2.

Dan Greenberg gave a non-committal nod to the driver, hesitated for a full second, then slid onto the seat and closed the door, suddenly enwrapped in the upholstered silence of the big car. The driver swung out into the traffic.

The calmness with which he had accepted the unfolding of recent events did not surprise him. He did not feel the slightest fear or even consternation; only a growing curiosity accompanied by a not unpleasant feeling of butterflies in his stomach. He had always been able to take things as they came, and nothing in his experience had ever made him lose his cool. His friends and acquaintances accused him of being indifferent, but he did not feel that way deep inside. He could be considered cold and calculating, even possessed of an iron logic and nerves of steel – but never indifferent. He believed himself to possess an almost brilliant ability to analyze situations, an ability which enabled him to know when to give in, to know when resistance would be counterproductive. There had been times when these qualities had also made him doubt whether he was entirely sane – that perhaps there was something basically deficient in his character, in his personality; but in his heart he knew this was not the case.

The car continued moving towards its unknown destination. As always in such situations, he was reminded of the war: the deep penetration into enemy territory, shells falling and spraying fragments in every direction, vehicles on fire, the smell of burning flesh. He could almost picture the shell crater that had been turned into a casualty collection point: dozens of soldiers lying on the ground without limbs or with their stomachs torn open; weeping screaming, in pain—above them an unceasing, torrential rain and beside them those of their comrades who had remained whole, paralyzed with fear.

In the midst of that tumult, he had been the only one to remain calm, poised, utterly without anxiety. It was as if the situation did not affect him, as if it were not his life that was threatened. He looked around him soberly and critically and understood that he and his comrades were surrounded, and that the rest was only a matter of time. And then he had had an idea. One moment he did not know what to do, and then the next instant a plan had crystallized. A short distance away, near a thorn bush growing in the dust – he needed another minute to finalize the details, then he crawled among the falling shells, the whistling bullets, the smoke of the grenades and cannon. He sensed only his own sweat, the smell of the burning earth, and the passing of precious minutes.

He had felt no nausea when he turned the corpse on its back. Even when he looked into the gray, frozen face, he felt only relief: it was a normal face, with no special marks. He quickly felt the pocket of the beige safari suit and then – a surge of joy.

The memory was suddenly cut off; someone was speaking to him.

“Put these on, please.” The driver was holding out a pair of very dark sunglasses. As he put them on, he realized they were totally opaque.

He hesitated deliberately, as if he did not understand, waiting until the next intersection. This, he assumed, would help him to remain oriented, even after putting on the glasses. At the same time he stole a glance at the speedometer: they were traveling at about 40 kilometers an hour and the odometer read 56,522.

The light at the intersection turned red and the car stopped. To their right was the Kol-Bo Shalom department store. He put on the glasses. The light must have changed, for the car started forward, turning right. He began counting the seconds silently, trying to maintain a steady rhythm. As he reached 82, the car made another right, and he began to count again. 105—then a

left; 128—another left; 41—a sharp right, apparently into a courtyard. He heard a heavy metal gate grinding closed behind him as the car stopped and its engine was turned off. “82 right, 105 left, 128 left, 41 right; 82 right, 105 left, 128 left, 41 right...” he repeated to himself, in the hope that later the numbers would be able to tell him where he was.

“You can take off the glasses,” said the driver, in a tone of command.

A near total gloom met his eyes. He tried to get used to the darkness and to read the odometer, but it was too black. As the driver left the car, Greenberg lit himself a cigarette, with feigned casualness, using the flame of his lighter to illuminate the odometer. They had driven nearly four kilometers since he had covered his eyes.

“Come,” said the driver, “you can smoke inside.”

He lazily got out of the car and slammed the door, deliberately taking his time in order to get a sense of his location. He was in a small underground garage, with space for only two cars. He walked over a rough concrete floor to where the driver stood beside a rusty steel security door, next to which was an electronic panel.

As the driver quickly punched the entrance code, Greenberg added the numbers to his memory. The lock gave a brief hum, then clicked open. The driver beckoned him to follow, and began climbing the cement staircase two steps at a time; looking backward at the top and waiting for him.

Another metal door opened and a strong light glared in his eyes.

* * *

The place resembled a small waiting room. A long, faded brown couch took up the length of one wall, and opposite were two folding wooden chairs.

Greenberg did not wait for the driver to invite him to sit, but went straight to the couch. After a moment the room’s other door opened and a tall man appeared. His short, gray hair, solid frame, and stolid face reminded Greenberg of a professional soldier. He gave a slight nod and beckoned Greenberg into the inner room.

He rose from the couch and entered a small, nearly empty, whitewashed room. Other than an old-fashioned black telephone resting on a wall bracket in the corner, there was nothing remarkable in the room. The tall man crossed from the door in measured steps and moved behind a simple desk, pointing with a finger to the chair opposite. Both men sat down almost simultaneously.

The tall man silently opened one of the desk drawers and drew out a black plastic ash tray, which he pushed towards his visitor. He then leaned back in his chair and began to speak.

“You were summoned here because we would like to propose that you join us.”

“Who are you?” Greenberg asked the obvious question, feeling as if he were taking part in a game in which his actions had been planned in advance.

“We’ll get to that question,” the man answered, reaching into the desk again and pulling out a thick, gray, cardboard file. He leafed through the file until he found what he was looking for, then began to read in a dry, matter-of-fact-voice:

“Dan Greenberg, born in Israel, age 41; family status – single; height – 1.75 meters; weight – 70 kilograms; color of eyes – brown; color of hair – brown; shape of face – oval; distinguishing marks – none.”

Very nice, thought Greenberg disparagingly. So far he hasn’t said anything you couldn’t see just by looking at me.

“Present occupation – sales manager; other occupations – electronics technician, tour guide; hobbies – photography; languages – fluent in English, French, German, and Hebrew,

partial knowledge of Italian; length of military service – three years; military specialties – anti-terrorist and self-defense techniques.”

How the hell does he know all that? Greenberg wondered. Did he have access to my army file, perhaps as a former senior officer? Greenberg began to feel uneasy.

“Personality characteristics – cool-headed, able to lead, quick-witted, imaginative, consistent, has personal charisma and a rare ability to form social rapport quickly; special comments – has phenomenal memory.” The man closed the file.

“Is that all?” Greenberg asked, nodding ironically at the bursting file.

“All the rest doesn’t concern us,” the man replied easily. “And now that we’ve had a little chat about you, I’ll present us to you, in full confidence of your ability to keep a secret.”

The man paused and Greenberg looked straight into his eyes.

“We belong to an organization which you must have heard about recently,” the man continued, “The Rising.”

The Rising, thought Greenberg, without surprise. I should have known. The ridiculous way the meeting had been arranged, and the way the “boss” had conducted it so far, smacked of a novice terrorist organization drawing its inspiration from the movies. But the no-nonsense manner of speaking of the man opposite him – was the organization staffed by a core of tough ex-army officers? It was conceivable, and not unreasonable. For the abrupt change in Israel’s relationship with the United States had been accompanied by a worsening of the economic situation beyond all recognition: during recent months hundreds of thousands of people had learned the meaning of the term “below the poverty line;” the number of jobseekers was growing from day to day; while the country’s various welfare bodies were able to provide the needy with less and less support. In such a situation, there might be nothing easier for many than to be swept towards violence! Indeed bombs had recently been planted in several Arab markets and thoroughfares, while leaflets were distributed signed by the organization calling itself The Rising. In a country of scores of thousands of reserve officers, there was actually no reason why some of them could not serve as the core of such an underground. Already during the ride here, Greenberg had tried to prepare himself for some kind of eventuality like this – though he had not actually thought of The Rising. Nevertheless, now that it had been mentioned explicitly, he experienced a certain shock. Why? He had no logical explanation.

“Why me?” he asked finally. “And why now?”

The tall man’s lips twisted in an ironic smile. “How should we describe it? The right attributes.... A good personal background.... I’m referring to certain events in your past that, because of which, we feel –“

Greenberg felt a mounting rage. Despite the casual manner of speaking, it was clear to him that the man knew what he was talking about – and wouldn’t hesitate to exploit the painful wound. He instantly relived those terrible moments. He could almost hear the voice over the loudspeaker at the giant electronics plant where he used to work: Dan Greenberg, Dan Greenberg, report to the general manager’s office; Dan Greenberg, Dan Greenberg...” He remembered how he had walked to the office, where he was met by a waiting policeman, and a doctor and a nurse dressed in white, and they told him of the tragedy in a few cautious sentences. His face had remained impassive; only his hand had jumped for the second it took to absorb the fact that his parents, his sister, and her two-year-old son had been killed by a bomb planted in a handbag left at a downtown café. The news bulletin an hour later described it as a terrorist act. Radio Monte Carlo had broadcast from Beirut that a faction of the Radical Front for the Liberation of Palestine had claimed responsibility.

Greenberg could still remember how his eyes had remained dry and burning even as he had stood before the open graves. He had felt a certain distance, as if a screen separated him from everything else – silent, held in check, motionless. He had felt no desire for revenge; only pain that threatened to burst forth and a deep emptiness. At that moment he would have given anything to be able to cry – to cry for once with all his heart. And all the handshaking – dozens of hands without faces – and the meaningless words of comfort trying to penetrate his consciousness, the sound of weeping from every side, and the defense minister exploiting the event in order to prattle at the graveside about the need for a response... When the ceremony was over and people began to leave, only he had remained standing frozen in place, staring about in numb bewilderment. Only his eyes moved: from the wreath of flowers to the gravediggers finishing their work, and from them to the rabbi as he walked away.

He had no recollection of what happened to him during the days that followed. He could not recall how long he had driven aimlessly around in his car, on a road that had no beginning and no end, staring at the gray-black asphalt and listening to the monotonous murmur of his tires on the road surface.

For a split second a deeply buried memory flashed in his mind of a crowded room in a nameless roadside inn. The memory faded. His fingers, which had been digging into the wooden arm of his chair, relaxed.

“What exactly are you proposing?” he finally asked the tall man.

The man shifted in his seat, and Greenberg interpreted the action as an expression of unease. “You understand, of course, that I cannot go into detail at the moment. We’ll have to put you through some tests – mainly psychometric – and afterwards you’ll undergo some training in the field we decide upon as your specialty.”

“And if I’m not suitable?”

“Don’t worry. With qualities like yours, and considering the range of our activities, there’s no such danger.”

What arrogance, thought Greenberg to himself. “Thanks,” he said firmly. “It’s a flattering offer – but I think I’ll have to turn it down.”

The face of the tall man remained frozen. No doubt he’s experienced in such things, thought Greenberg; if I didn’t know he was disappointed, I might have thought he was pleased. “All right,” the man said, standing up.

He did not offer to shake hands. Instead, he bent over the desk and scribbled something on a piece of paper. “Here,” he held it out to Greenberg, “in case you change your mind and want to reach me. This is the number. The name is Zvi.”

Greenberg took the paper and glanced at it, before folding it and putting it into his shirt pocket. The tall man came out from behind the desk and walked him to the door.

“Mr. Greenberg is leaving now,” he called into the waiting room as he opened the door. The driver rose from his chair.

Greenberg held the door close behind him. He turned quickly, as if to say something more, but the driver took his arm and gently, but firmly, led him away. “Let’s go,” he said.

3.

The sudden braking of the car jerked his head forward, and were it not for the seatbelt he would have been slammed into the windshield. The driver roughly pulled the opaque glasses from Greenberg's face, then reached across him and threw the door open. He got out without a word.

As he stood on the sidewalk, blinking in the abrupt glare of the harsh sunlight, the car peeled away with tires screeching. Greenberg stared around in a daze. The street looked familiar. He unconsciously began walking down its slope.

A young mother pushing a baby carriage almost ran into him. He swerved aside at the last second, bumping his shoulder into an oncoming man. The sharp pain of the blow and the noise of the street jarred him back to reality. He now recognized where he was, and knew that his car was parked in the next street on the right. He approached the corner, reaching into the right front pocket of his slacks for his key ring.

He rounded the corner and froze, startled, his mind refusing to absorb the scene of an empty space where he knew he had parked his car less than two hours before. Greenberg paced quickly up and down the sidewalk, his eyes searching the street. It can't be, it just can't be! he repeated as he walked. He remembered the delicatessen with the neon sign and the hardware store next door, whose display window he had intended to look at. Everything remained the way it was, except the care he had parked there some 90 minutes before was no longer there. A spirited curse escaped his lips.

Crossing the street, he asked the lottery ticket seller in his booth opposite if he had seen what happened to his car, but got only a wordless shrug of the shoulders in reply.

Damn! He swore to himself, his anger bursting. Damn!

* * *

"Shut your mouth, bitch!" the man yelled, balling his fists. "I'll kill you!"

"You hear? You hear?" the woman asked the desk officer at the Dizengoff Street precinct. "Now he's threatening me. Add that to the complaint!"

The sergeant tried as best as he could to calm the couple standing before him with their angry red faces, waving their arms and yelling at each other oblivious to their surroundings.

"Okay, okay," the officer hollered, trying to make himself heard over their shouting. "What should I write down?"

"That this whore..."

"Whore?! He's calling me a whore? You should see..."

"Quiet!" the officer thundered. "This is a police station, not a market!"

His efforts were in vain, for the two were totally involved in their quarrel and only shouted louder. A man in civilian clothes came out of an inner room, an angry scowl on his face. He took the couple aside and began speaking forcefully to them.

Greenberg saw his opportunity and advanced to the counter. "Excuse me," he began. "My car –"

Before he could complete his sentence, the sergeant had shoved a form to him.

Twenty minutes later, he watched intently from over the counter as the officer quickly typed the details he had listed on the form into a computer terminal. He knew from rumor that finding a stolen car in Tel Aviv was no easy matter. Who knows, by now his three-year-old Audi 4 was probably over the Green Line, being dismantled for parts in a Palestinian chop-shop. He

resigned himself to the thought of most likely having to be a pedestrian for the next few weeks. The very thought depressed him.

After a moment, the requested data streamed from the computer printer. The sergeant casually ripped the sheet from the machine and glanced at it, then a puzzled look came over his face. "What the hell, is this?!" he murmured to himself. He looked at Greenberg and said, not without a measure of impatience, "According to this, sir, your car was taken of the road for safety reasons, after being severely damaged in an accident three days ago. It was declared a total loss."

It took Greenberg about 10 seconds to digest what he had heard. "That can't be!" he exclaimed. "I've owned that car for almost three years and it's never been in an..."

"One moment, sir" the officer cut him off. "There could easily be a mistake. Do you have the registration with you?"

"Of course."

Greenberg reached into his back pocket – his wallet was gone!

He quickly retraced his moves since leaving home, while continuing to pat his other pockets in vain. The café. He had probably left it at the café.

"Kept the registration in the car, eh?" the sergeant smirked, shaking his head. "It's always the same story. People won't learn not to leave valuables in the car, especially not documents –"

"No, no," Greenberg protested. "The papers are probably in my –"

"Sir," the sergeant cut him off, "without the registration I have no way of checking. As far as I'm concerned, the car with the number you gave me doesn't exist!" With a shrug of his shoulders, he turned to an elderly woman standing behind Greenberg. "Yes, how can I help you, ma'am?"

Greenberg turned and walked outside.

* * *

The female clerk at the Interior Ministry counter was about 25 and, in Greenberg's estimation, wore too much makeup. He slipped his completed application forms through a slit in the greenish-tinted glass barrier, along with two passport-size photos that were still damp. The clerk took the forms, then scanned the computer screen for a moment and then looked up at Greenberg with what seemed to him suspicion in her eyes.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"No problem," came her unconvincing reply. "Would you please go to inquiries, Room 51? There seems to be some problem in the registry. It's down the hall, on the left, right after Information – second door on the right. I'll tell them you're on the way," she concluded, and with unexpected efficiency, picked up the phone.

A metal frame engraved with the number 51 was fastened to the left of a dark green door. In the space usually reserved for the name of the clerk inside was written a single word: Inquiries. He knocked once and went in.

The middle-aged woman sitting behind a simple office desk looked up at him as if she had been awaiting his arrival and motioned for him to sit down. Her blue rinsed hair was immaculately coiffed and her eyes were hidden behind fashionably tinted glasses.

"Just one more moment, sir," she said. "The material in your case should arrive from the archives in just a minute."

Indeed, she had barely finished speaking when a messenger boy entered the room carrying an armful of files, most of them to be delivered to other offices. He stood next to the woman's desk and waited patiently for her to pull the wanted files from his pile.

“But wait a second...” the woman murmured to herself as she opened a file.

As a look of puzzlement spread over the woman’s face, Greenberg leaned towards her and began employing a skill he had developed as a youth: the ability to read upside down. His eyes quickly scanned the lines of type and their content jolted him into a sudden dizziness. On the desk in front of him, at arm’s reach, was a death certificate – with his name on it!

No, there was no mistake, and it wasn’t his imagination. It was not some other Greenberg, a common enough name: the personal details were entirely correct. Date of birth, place of birth, parents’ names – all of these were right.

Beyond the shock it gave him, the meaning of it all gave him a sudden twinge of fear. Under the heading “Cause of Death” was listed a medical term in Latin. But the following sentence, written in plain language, was something he could understand: skull fracture. The cause: automobile accident. In the upper left-hand corner of the document there was a date: three days ago. Estimated time of death: 10:30 a.m.

When the woman recovered, her reaction was businesslike: she pulled another official form from somewhere and Dan Greenberg, armed with a list of the documents he needed to correct the registration, was asked to return to her office in a week.

* * *

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t help you,” the teller said, languidly chewing her gum.

“What?!” exclaimed Greenberg, who had not expected anything more than the usual bureaucratic runaround, but now felt as if he had been slapped in the face. “I don’t think you understand. This morning my credit card was stolen, and all I want to do is report the theft and get a new card, and withdraw 200 shekel in cash!”

“Sir,” she said, popping her gum, “that’s just impossible!”

“But...”

“Just a moment, I’ll get the assistant manager,” she said, getting up and going back into the recesses of the bank. The woman waiting in line behind Greenberg grumbled at the delay. After about five minutes the teller returned, accompanied by a conservative looking man wearing a gray suit and tie.

“Come with me, sir,” said the assistant manager, a man Greenberg recognized by sight, but had never met.

Greenberg followed him behind the counter, but to his surprise, the assistant manager did not conduct him to his office. As soon as they were out of sight of the customers waiting in line, the man stopped abruptly and turned to address him.

“Mr. Greenberg,” the man said, clearing his throat. “You of course understand that, no matter how much I might want to do so, I cannot authorize a cash withdrawal. You also cannot receive a new credit card. I certainly understand your situation, but regulations, are you surely know – “

“What’s the problem? What’s wrong? People lose credit cards every day. I’m not the first and surely not the last. What the h...what in the world is the problem?” Greenberg decided this was not the time to begin cursing.

“Sir,” the assistant manager said, trying to sound more assertive, “under the existing circumstances, I cannot – “

What ‘existing circumstances’? What are you talking about?” asked Greenberg, cutting him off.

“Well, sir, you know as well as I do that, without a doubt, your account is well overdrawn, much more so than usual, to be exact. Under these circumstances, I do not have the

authority to approve a larger overdraft – to my regret, of course. With regard to your credit card, you may put in a request; but when the company asks us for a statement of your account, you must understand there is no chance you will get the card.”

“Just a minute! Are you telling me that you’re not going to let me withdraw money from my account?”

“As long as the computer shows that your account is so heavily overdrawn.”

“But that can’t be right! I’ve always been careful not to have an overdraft.”

“Mr. Greenberg,” the assistant manager began with a look of distaste, “of course there may be some mistake, or some misunderstanding. I would suggest we examine the matter again tomorrow, when the updated print-outs arrive. Perhaps a clarification will arrive even sooner – maybe even this afternoon.”

“In that case, I’ll come back this afternoon,” Greenberg yielded.

“You had better call me first, sir” said the assistant manager.

“Yes, I understand,” Greenberg replied bitterly. “I understand.”

* * *

At about 12:30 p.m. Greenberg managed to escape the hot, sweaty, noisy, crowded stink of the bus where he had stood for the past 40 minutes. He shoved his way through the press of shopping bags and unyielding shoulders and got off at a stop near his home, a large apartment building in the upper middle class section of north Tel Aviv. He stood still for a moment, breathing deeply and thanking God the exhausting ride was over. He could not remember the last time he had ridden a bus, but now that all his money amounted to the dwindling few bills in his pocket and some change, he could not afford to take a cab.

He paused in the entrance hall to extract a folded envelope sticking out of his mail box. Just as he pressed the elevator button, he decided on second thought not to wait for it, and quickly took the stairs to the fourth floor. As he mounted the stairs, he could still feel the sway of the bus in his legs.

He pictured his snug bachelor’s apartment and where he would look for the papers he was now almost certain he had left behind, perhaps in the drawer of the little table by the door. He quickly approached the door, his key ring in hand.

His key would not move in the lock. The sophisticated cylinder stubbornly refused to turn.

Startled, Greenberg held the coded Swiss key up to the light. Perhaps it had become bent and therefore wouldn’t work? Seeing that nothing appeared to be wrong with the key, he carefully reinserted it and tried to turn it. Nothing.

Losing his temper, Greenberg grasped the doorknob and threw his shoulder fiercely against the door. It remained unmoved, but the sound of him smashing into the door echoed in the empty hall. The pain spreading through his shoulder distracted Greenberg from the sound of the door opening behind him.

“They’ve already managed to change the lock.”

Greenberg jerked his head around. It was Dana, the student who lived in the opposite flat. She would exchange greetings with him and occasionally borrow something, but that was the extent of their relationship.

“Excuse me? What did you say?”

“The new tenants – the ones who moved in this morning. They seem like nice people. Did you forget something? But that’s not what I wanted to ask you. Listen, the people you hired to move your stuff worked like crazy. They did it so fast – an hour, hour and a half, and it was all

packed. You must give me their phone number. A friend of mine has to move in another two weeks, and I'd like to recommend –“

Dan Greenberg stood frozen in place. “Good God,” he murmured. He felt the color drain from his face and with his sleeve mechanically wiped the sweat that had suddenly broken out on his brow. He continued to stand there without moving for a long moment, staring at but not seeing the young girl who stood before him, his thoughts racing.

“What’s the matter, Dan? Do you feel all right?” the girl asked in concern, reaching out a hand to support him.

Then suddenly he remembered, and understood.

No! He hadn’t forgotten his wallet in the apartment, and not in the café or anywhere else. That woman in the street...something in the way she shoved that baby carriage in front of him had drawn his attention even the moment it happened. Now he knew what had bothered him: she hadn’t been walking, but had simply been standing there, waiting for him to get out of the car! And the forceful way she has pushed the carriage, at the very moment he passed in front of her, as if she had been waiting for him...and the man who collided with him a second later...knocking into his shoulder with unexpected force...it was then, yes, then that they had lifted his wallet!

The events of the day, like the scattered pieces of a mosaic, came together in his mind in one terrible picture. The way his car had disappeared...the phony registration at the police station...the registry at the Interior Ministry...his bank account...and now – his apartment. He could not believe such a string of events was coincidental. But the occurrences he had been caught up in since the morning were like something from one of the spy novels he loved to read.

“Dan! Should I bring you a glass of water?”

The voice of the girl, who was still supporting his shoulder, brought him out of his thoughts. He absentmindedly leaned back against the coolness of the wall, for the first time feeling the cold sweat dripping down his back. The wet sensation jolted him back to reality. He suddenly felt nearly overcome with a wave of fear; and not just any fear, but the worst of all – the fear of the unknown, a fear in which he did not know or whom to be afraid of.

Only then did he look up and acknowledge the presence of the girl standing there, still eyeing him with concern. “It’s all right, everything’s all right,” he assured her, enlisting all that remained of his self-confidence to sound positive. “I just got a bit dizzy, probably from the heat.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries as they said goodbye (“And who’s going to ask me for a cup of sugar in the middle of the night?” he joked). Then Greenberg took the elevator down and walked outside into the blinding sunlight.

* * *

The humid heat only intensified his aggravation as he stood waiting for another overcrowded bus, which never seemed to arrive when he was in a hurry. He waited for nearly a quarter of an hour, shifting his weight from one foot to another and feeling the seat drip from his back and neck, making his shirt collar stick to him. When the bus finally came, the incessant babbling of his fellow passengers and the driver’s blaring radio threatened to drive him out of his mind. He tried to connect the day’s events in some logical order, but in vain. Things seemed to be unfolding too quickly to make any sense.

When he finally managed to slip into a vacated seat, he remembered the envelope he had found in his mailbox. Taking it from his pocket, he frowned with surprise to see it was from his company. It was unusual, for he could not remember ever receiving something from the company other than by internal mail.

Greenberg gently inserted the key to his former apartment under the envelope flap and worked it open. He spread open the letter and, as he began to absorb its contents, caught his breath. Unbelievably, he read the short sentences over and over. The dry, businesslike style caused the blood to drain from his face. The economy of statement did not allow him to understand what motive lay behind it. Once again, he vainly searched his mind for some logical explanation. Despite the fact that his job was just an additional aspect to the deluge of problems suddenly surrounding him, the letter was a considerable shock. The force of his anger and alarm made his blood surge through his veins. He felt his nerves stretched to the breaking point. He stood up and took out some of his rage by grabbing the stop-signaling cord and fiercely ringing the bell three times.

The only working public phone he could find was on the corner of a noisy intersection. Since he could not charge the battery of his mobile phone, he decided to use it as little as possible and to use landlines as much as possible. He loosened his spare telephone token from his key ring and inserted it in the phone, as he closed the glass door with his other hand, in an effort to reduce some of the clamor.

It was exactly 1:45. The telephone at the other end rang again and again, and Greenberg was about to return the receiver, when the familiar voice of the receptionist came on the line: "RSM Elevators and Electric Drive Accessories, good afternoon!"

"Hi, Yael, this is Dan. Please get me Amos."

"Mr. Gilboa is not in," came the dry, officious answer. Mr. Gilboa? She didn't ask him how he was, as she usually did, or express surprise that he was calling in so late in the day.

"Oho, Mr. Gilboa..." Greenberg tried to inject a humorous tone. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No, he didn't leave a message." The girl seemed to hesitate, as if trying to evade something. "I'll tell him you called," she said finally.

Something in her tone of voice sounded strange to him. He also knew it was not the manager's custom to leave the office during working hours. He thanked her and hung up, then waited.

After two minutes had passed, he redialed the number. He couldn't help feeling a bit foolish at what he was about to do, but his need to know was too strong. He had to find out.

"RSM Elevators and Electric Drive Accessories, good afternoon!"

Where does she get the strength to repeat that unchanging refrain over and over, and always so pleasantly? Greenberg thought. He partially covered the mouthpiece with his hand and deepened his voice, changing its rhythm at the same time.

"How do you do?"

The next second was crucial: would she recognize his voice, and if not, what should he say? From his experience as a salesman, he knew there were four things that could get a man's immediate attention: money, health, power, and women. He discarded the last category immediately, while the first and third seemed unnecessarily complicated.

"This is Dr. Immanuel Regev," he said finally, with a tinge of urgency in his tone. "I must speak with Mr. Gilboa without delay."

"Right away, sir!" came the reply, as expected. There came a moment's silence, then a click as the call was transferred.

He heard the familiar voice answer, sounding a bit surprised: "Hello? Gilboa here!"

"Amos, it's Dan!"

At the other end, Greenberg heard a gasp. When the manager finally spoke, each syllable was distinct.

“Mr. Greenberg.” Dan started at the official form of address – they had always been on a first-name basis. “I don’t know what you want. As far as I’m concerned the matter is finished, and I have no desire to have any further negotiations with you. I think I’ve made myself clear.”

“What matter? What are you talking about? I don’t understand a thing!”

“You understand quite well,” the man said, trying to restrain his forcefulness and maintain the officialism of the conversation. “Don’t play dumb. Stupidity isn’t one of your qualities. I only hope the check doesn’t inconvenience you. If so…”

“What check? What are you talking about?”

“Really, Mr. Greenberg,” the words rolled out, “don’t tell me you didn’t get the check!”

Dan’s fingers searched inside the envelope again – and indeed there was something else there in addition to the letter; which he had overlooked in his anger. He quickly unfolded the piece of paper and spread it open on the glass wall of the booth.

Four lines detailed the various payments due him for the previous month’s work. Stapled to the bottom of the printed document was a check. On the back, under the line for his endorsement, was a printed statement that his cashing of this check represents the severing of any possible connection with his employer.

“Now-now I see,” mumbled Greenberg. “But why? What does this mean?”

“Look, Mr. Greenberg,” the voice began roughly. “Let’s get things clear, once and for all. I had hoped our relationship was based on friendship, respect, and mutual trust, but you… You have violated this trust.” The man hesitated, then resumed, choosing his words carefully. “I wouldn’t have any grudge against you at all, had you come to me yourself, looked straight in the eye, and told me you’d decided to quit. Just the opposite: it would be very reasonable to assume that I’d try to convince you not to go, and tell you how I’d expect you to really advance in our company. But the way you did it – behind my back, without saying a word – is just a bit more than I can take.”

“Gilboa!” Greenberg roared into the receiver, startling himself at the loudness of his own voice. “Who said anything about quitting? Where did you get such an absurd idea?”

“Really,” the voice at the other end of the line tried to remain calm, “I don’t want to lose my temper. I’ll say just one thing: I have the information, confirmed facts, the evidence, if you will – “

“Evidence? Evidence of what?” Greenberg cut him off. “Gilboa, you head a pretty big organization, you must have lots of information. What kind of ‘confirmed facts’ are you talking about?”

The voice at the other end growled back. “You don’t expect me to tell you my sources of information, do you? Besides – “

“Of course I expect you to!” thundered Greenberg.

“And besides,” Gilboa continued, “what makes you think I should accept your version, as if my information weren’t correct?”

“Because I’m telling you so!” came Greenberg’s bitter reply.

The other man remained silent for a long moment, as if hesitating. “Look, Dan,” he began, his voice seeming to waver, “if you really want to know, the whole thing never would have happened if you had taken some basic precautions. To tell you the truth, now that I think about it, I can’t help but be amazed at you. If you had only not used the office to write that letter you sent to that American company, Elevators of the Future” or whatever you call it.”

“What letter?”

“Really, Dan. The letter in which you confirmed the terms of your new employment, starting next month. You know at least three other people have access to your computer terminal.”

Greenberg froze. “My God,” he whispered to himself. “My God!”

“Dan?” The voice from the receiver jolted him from his thoughts. He instinctively felt he had to end the conversation. Whoever had set this up was no amateur, and wouldn’t let him get away so easily. He cast a nervous glance up and down the street, but failed to see anything unusual.

“Hello! Dan!”

While still watching the passing throng, Greenberg reached out and pulled down the receiver cradle with his free hand, ending the call.

But why, he asked himself over and over, trying to analyze and to understand the events of the day, to what purpose? There must be some kind of reason. Something he could not define kept troubling him. What now, he asked himself, what next?

The sound of the dial tone drew Greenberg’s attention to the receiver he still held in his hand. With a slight start he quickly dropped it into the cradle, letting go of it as if it were a hot object. He looked at his watch and saw it was 1:49. He sighed in relief. His call had taken exactly two minutes – not enough time to trace the call and listen in. If so, then they (and who were they?) still didn’t know that he knew. So much the better – at least until he decided what to do.

His mind worked feverishly. How were they expecting him to act? He should probably do the opposite of what they thought he would. But what the hell did they want?

His feeling of relief evaporated as quickly as it had come. He furrowed his brow in concentration till he felt the blood pounding at his temples. For the first time in his life, he felt his hands tremble. A sudden chill ran between his shoulders and down his legs. His knees knocked together. Who were they and what did they want from him? Why? Dear God, what do they want from me?

All at once he realized that this was exactly what they – whoever they were – expected him to feel. They wanted him to lose control, to act emotionally instead of logically, to... To do what?

Again Greenberg felt a mounting wave of anger, but checked it. No! He would not let anger rule his actions. He had to think, to quietly evaluate the situation. He had to weigh his steps with the greatest care, and for this reason he had first to evade Them. And in order to evade them, he first had to find them. Then he would know exactly who was following him.

Instinctively he decided that he had to act naturally, and not do anything that looked strange. Only that way, he thought, would he succeed in dulling their awareness. Then, at the moment of his choosing, he would act.

Greenberg smoothly left the booth and set off down the street, his outward calm belied by a heaving chest over a pounding heart. He had to enlist all of his willpower to hold his feelings in check. Walking with a steady pace and trying to slow his breathing, he scanned the street.

There: A late-model, blue Fiat parked ahead of him on the other side of the street. Two young men sat inside talking, occasionally casting a casual glance his way. Casual glance?

Once again Greenberg’s heart pounded. He fought the first – and expected—impulse to run. He must not, he knew. If he ran now, under the best circumstances only a few minutes would pass before the men in the car noticed his absence – if they were indeed following him – and they would arrive at the conclusion that he had disappeared on purpose. As for him, due to

the lack of time and the absence of planning, he wouldn't get very far. No: when the time came to get away from them, he would have to know exactly where he was going and what his objectives were. The getaway itself would have to be made in some crowded public place. Only then would those who sent them think it was just a case of incompetent trailing.

As for now, he must not do anything unusual, hasty, or unexpected that was liable to arouse their suspicions. Just the opposite! He had to dull their senses, let them feel sure they couldn't lose him.

Greenberg had never before thought about what facial expression he had when walking innocently in the street. Now he tried to convey utter casualness as he pretended to calmly approach and enter an Oriental restaurant just opposite the blue Fiat.