



CHAPTER ONE

MEIRA GOLDSTEIN HAD always been the strong one. Daughter of a high-ranking Shabak operative, she had it in her DNA to be tough and resilient and not let things get to her.

And yet...

Speaking to Simmy Sommers on the phone, as Meira now often did because they were separated by three thousand miles — from Meira's *yishuv* in Judea and Samaria to Bournemouth, where Simmy had already returned to school — it was more often twelve-and-a-half-year-old Meira, not fifteen-year-old Simmy, who fell apart into a blubbering heap of tears and memories too horrible to talk about.

And yet, Simmy had to talk about it with someone. Meira was the one who had endured the trauma with her. She definitely couldn't speak to her parents, and Anya Sadya, who had been incarcerated along with the two girls in Kalkilya and had been a key factor in their successful rescue, was only second best.

All the time *before* — before arriving in Israel with their Arab captors, before being imprisoned with Anya — it had been Meira

and Simmy, Simmy and Meira. So Simmy needed to talk to Meira — a lot. However, when she did, Meira found a gaping hole between them. Simmy, it turned out, was the more resilient of the two girls. Even though that final leap of faith from the window had been the most terrifying thing Simmy had ever experienced, she'd bounced back and, with a couple of therapy sessions at school, was doing well.

Meira was not doing well. At all.

At this stage, returning to school was out of the question. School was on another *yishuv* and involved a special armored bus with bulletproof windows taking the kids from one *yishuv* to the next, passing several Arab villages en route.

Not all Arab villages were hostile. In fact, many were friendly, and the grocery stores in several nearby *yishuvim* employed Arab workers to man the checkouts, help stock the shelves, and get the deliveries in. And who did the building work on the *yishuvim* if not Arabs, overseen by Jewish contractors?

The school bus didn't go near any hostile Arab villages, but Meira still refused to go to school. And her parents were wise enough, and experienced enough with PTSD, to know to give her time. They were arranging therapy sessions too, but so far Meira wouldn't leave her own front door, let alone go to the therapist's office on a neighboring *yishuv*.

Even at home, Meira wasn't the same girl as she'd been before her ordeal. She jumped at every sound. If someone came to the door — and in Avi Goldstein's line of work, that happened frequently — Meira ran and hid.

Her mother had to search for her in the most unlikely places — inside cabinets, under beds — anywhere Meira thought no one would find her. She only agreed to come out if it was one of her parents who discovered her and extended a friendly hand. Then

she'd unfold herself from the impossibly small package she'd managed to make of herself and wriggle out, not even looking slightly abashed at being caught yet again hiding from a friendly neighbor or a work colleague of her father. She was deeply traumatized, and nothing was reaching her in the depths of it.

Meira's twin brothers, who were only two and a half and didn't understand what she was going through, found ways to scare her just to see her scream in terror. They'd jump out at her and say "Boo!" or worse. In the end, Ayelet Goldstein reluctantly had to farm them out once again. They couldn't be at home with Meira while she was like that, and, out of the family pecking order, she definitely had priority while she healed.

Meira was having trouble going to sleep in her own bed alone in her room. Her mother would sit with her, talking to her softly and gently, until Meira's eyelids grew heavy and she was drowsy with exhaustion. Ayelet would tell her stories, lovely safe stories, or sing to her sweet soft songs of happy times and beautiful things, until Meira fell asleep. She'd stay there for a while afterward, making sure her daughter was deeply asleep, and then tiptoe out of the room.

But even so, when her parents opened their bedroom door in the morning, more often than not they'd find Meira lying on the floor outside their door, wrapped up in her duvet like a cocoon, fast asleep. They learned to open their bedroom door with care so that they didn't trip over her.

"What can we do?" Ayelet said to Avi late one night when they were sure they weren't being overheard. "This can't go on. The child has severe PTSD."

"She needs to learn to take care of herself, toughen up." Avi snorted. "I'll sign her up for shooting classes. We have a good range not far from here."

“She needs therapy, not more guns!” Ayelet was horrified. “Meira needs loving and hugging and telling her everything’s now okay. She jumps and screams when the twins tease her. Imagine how she’ll react when she hears gunfire!”

Avi was steadfast. “She’s a Shabaknik’s daughter, like it or not, Ayelet. She needs to learn how to defend herself, how to fight back. The boys too, when they’re old enough.”

Ayelet knew when her husband’s mind was made up. “Fine,” she said. “Let’s hope the shooting range does the trick. I’m going ahead with the plans for the therapist, though. If Meira won’t go to her, maybe the therapist will come here.”

Husband and wife smiled at each other. They had everything under control. Avi would teach Meira to shoot. That would give her the confidence to stop being afraid. And Ayelet would send her to a therapist. Secretly, Avi thought therapists were for weaklings, but he was willing to give in on this one. Why not?



CHAPTER TWO

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Avi hustled a struggling Meira into his car. He kept saying, “You’ll love this, *motek*. You’ll love this.”

Calmed down by his reassuring voice, Meira sat back meekly and allowed herself to be buckled in. Avi drove slowly, not wanting to startle her by any jerky or bumpy driving. When they got to the shooting range, all was quiet. Avi had specially requested that there should be no gunfire noise to greet his already traumatized daughter.

When they walked in, he was holding Meira’s hand tightly, as much to stop her from running away as for support. Meira kept looking at him and glancing around. Then she realized where she was.

“No, Abba, no!”

“If you learn how to shoot well, you won’t ever be afraid again,” Avi lied.

She was already pulling on his hand, like a dog pulling on a leash to show it wanted to go in the opposite direction.

Avi wasn’t giving up just yet. “Come on, Meira. Once you hold a gun, you’ll feel differently.”

She pulled even harder. He led her, with extreme reluctance on her part, into the shooting range. Meira looked at the paper targets in the shape of men, fresh and unsullied by holes. The holes were for her to make.

Then Avi let go just long enough to reach for a gun to give her.

Meira took one look at it and screamed. "No, Abba! No guns!" She ran away from him, out of the building.

Avi ran after her and couldn't find her. She wasn't near the car. He started to panic himself. It was one thing looking for Meira at home, but where could she be out here?

"Meira!" he yelled, clutching his head in desperation and fear. *Ayelet was right*, he had to admit to himself. This hadn't been a great idea. Meira wasn't going to heal with tough love. She needed a softer touch. And yes, as much as he hated even more to admit, she needed therapy.

But where was she? He called out her name again. His voice echoed off the surrounding hills.

Then came a small, pleading voice. "Abba, please stop screaming. You're scaring me. I'm under the car."

Under the car?! What was she, a cat? Avi's heart broke as he bent down and looked under the vehicle, to see his daughter lying on the hard ground, curled up and hiding, indeed like a cat in a small space.

Yet for Meira, the hard, unforgiving ground was a place of forgiveness, of safety. Away from the guns, the noise, the terror. She was looking up at her father with frightened eyes, pleading silently for him to stop screaming, to stop scaring her.

"Meira," he said, his voice shaking as he struggled with relief. He tried to keep himself calm for her, if not for himself. He held out his hand. "Come out of there, please. Come to Abba."

"Don't make me go back in there," Meira begged. "If I come

out, you won't make me go back in there with the guns, will you?"

"I won't make you go back in there. I give you my word," Avi said, hating that it had come to this — that his little girl didn't trust him enough to come out of her hiding place unless he promised not to send her back to her dark nightmare.

Meira unfolded herself and emerged from under the car, holding her father's hand. He took her into his arms for a hug, and, to his dismay, he felt her heart pounding in terror.

"You poor child," he said. "I'm so sorry I made you do that. Please forgive me."

Meira said nothing, just stood there, holding him, trembling. Avi waited patiently until her shaking had stopped and she seemed calmer, before releasing his grip and gently easing her into the car.

"We're going home. I won't make you do that again. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Abba," Meira said, when it patently wasn't okay at all.



CHAPTER THREE

ON THE DRIVE home, Avi again drove slowly so as not to startle Meira. He was beginning to realize the depths of her trauma. This was more than he, or, indeed, Ayelet, could handle alone.

When they got home, Meira flew into the house and into her mother's arms, as if escaping from the enemy, her father. It was not one of Avi Goldstein's finer moments. He stood there awkwardly, as if, for once, he didn't know his place in the world.

Ayelet looked at him over her daughter's huddled form. "Therapist. Now."

Avi could do nothing but nod.

Ayelet gently disentangled herself from Meira. "We're going to take you to someone who understands these things, *motek*. Someone professional who can talk to you. Make you better."

Meira shrank away. "No. Don't make me go away from home again, please."

Ayelet felt terrible for her daughter. She looked at her husband, and a signal passed between them.

"I'll get Naama to come here," Ayelet said.

"Is Naama the therapist?" Meira asked in a small, frightened voice.

"Yes," Ayelet said. "A very nice, understanding lady."

"Okay, Ima," Meira said. "But I want only you with me when I speak to Naama — not Abba."

Avi went cold with shock.

"Abba only meant the best for you." This from a loyal Ayelet, seeing her husband's pain.

"Only you," Meira repeated, unwilling or, more likely, unable to compromise and be nice.

"I'm sorry," was all Avi managed to say. He was going to add, "I thought you were tough," but he thought better of it. No point in making things worse than they already were.



THE THERAPIST, NAAMA, A KINDLY middle-aged lady, lived on a neighboring *yishuv* but was only too happy to come over and do the session in the Goldsteins' house. Her own children were grown and flown, and her husband worked in Jerusalem, so all she did all day was listen to people and hear their troubles. Most were domestic issues or parenting problems. She'd sometimes treated people traumatized after a terrorist attack. But she'd never met anyone as deeply affected as Meira.

Meira wouldn't even look at Naama at first. She made very sure that her father was nowhere nearby. As their house was small and the walls were thin, this involved Ayelet sending Avi out on an errand and telling him to take an hour to do it. Then, at last, Meira sat down and gave Naama a tentative nod to show she was ready to talk.

The therapist put her watch down on the table in front of them.