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Opening Extract from...

Asylum City

Written by Liad Shoham

Translated by Sara Kitai

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ASYLUM CITY

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Translated by Sara Kitai



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Chapter 1

A blast of cold air struck Michal Poleg in the face when she stepped out of the bus in north Tel Aviv. She pulled her windbreaker tighter around her. She hadn't dressed warmly enough, as usual, and as usual, she hadn't taken an umbrella. At least there was a break in the "storm" the weatherman had predicted in dramatic tones. For the time being, it wasn't raining. That's how it always is around here, she thought. Two drops of rain and they call it a storm. But the real storms, the things that actually matter, get ignored. Typical. A white car pulled up in front of the bus she'd just exited and a man in a black leather jacket got out, glancing in her direction.

She started walking quickly, making her way from Milano Square to Yehudah Hamaccabi Street. In five minutes she'd be home. It had been a long day. She'd been working as a volunteer at OMA for just over a year. They usually closed at five on Friday, but on days like this, when it was cold and wet out, they were busier than normal so they stayed open late. The Organization for Migrant Aid couldn't keep regular business hours. They had to do what they could to find a solution for all the refugees who didn't have a roof over their head, and there were too many like that. But whatever they did, it was never enough.

Michal wasn't in a good place these days. She was sensing a regression, as if she was back where she was when she first came to work at OMA. Her rough exterior, the defenses she'd built up around herself, were starting to crumble. In the early days she'd sit open-mouthed, listening in disbelief to the stories she heard, not knowing how to respond. She'd go home and lie on the couch with a bag of frozen vegetables on her head, staring at the ceiling. She couldn't take it in. She felt she was fumbling in the dark, that she'd landed in a strange place, on a different planet where she didn't know the

rules. In time, she learned what to say, what she could and couldn't do to help, and mainly, how to listen in silence. It was all down to Hagos, their interpreter. He taught her that there was strength in silence, that sometimes just listening to people did more good than shouting to the high heavens. But shouting to the high heavens was exactly what she felt like doing now, because despite his strength and his silence, Hagos had been deported back to the infernal country he'd fled, and they'd murdered him there, just like she'd feared. She'd had enough. She was sick of feeling helpless, of being powerless to make a difference. She wanted to do something more than listen; she wanted to make a real change, not just put out fires.

That's why she filed a complaint with the Bar Association a few days ago against Assistant State Attorney Yariv Ninio. The lying weasel had concealed from the court the legal opinion of the Foreign Ministry that could have saved Hagos. Itai didn't want her to do it, but she felt compelled to take action. She couldn't sit back and do nothing.

As she crossed the square, Michal noticed that the tall man in the leather jacket was right behind her. His footsteps echoed through the open space, now deserted due to the "storm" and the late hour.

The refugees she worked with needed her to be focused and dedicated. They could sense when she was on edge. Without Hagos, she had no one to talk to. Itai was too busy, and lately every conversation with him ended in an argument. She found it hard to talk to Arami, the other—now the only—interpreter. She knew how devoted he was to the men and women who came to them for help, and she always felt guilty around him, as if she were responsible for their hardships. She had the feeling he regarded her as a government agent: rich, white, complacent.

Michal glanced behind her. The man was less than two yards back. He looked her directly in the eye, his face expressionless. Here she was in the old north of Tel Aviv, presumably one of the safest sections of the city, and she was frightened. She regularly wandered

the slums around the old bus station that were home to the refugees without sensing any fear. People just didn't understand. Racism and prejudice were so deeply embedded that it was very hard to uproot them, especially when the government and that loathsome Member of Knesset Ehud Regev were conducting a relentless campaign against the refugees, labeling them "dangerous," "drunken," "violent," and "disease carriers." Try to explain that they were human beings just like us who wanted nothing more than to live a normal, quiet life, that one of the main reasons they left their homes and their homelands was to escape the violence.

She kept up a quick pace, attempting to put more distance between herself and the man behind her. I'm probably paranoid, she tried to convince herself. She turned right into a side street just to be sure. Across the street from her was a clinic, its windows dark. She passed a small playground, filled with toddlers and their nannies in the morning, but empty at this hour of the evening. The swings were swaying back and forth in the wind. She realized she hadn't imagined it. The man was following her. She heard his footsteps coming closer.

In Michal's world, there were two types of Israelis: the ones who tried to help, to do the right thing, and the ones who wanted to hurt or exploit. It was a polarized world with no middle ground. You were either a devil or an angel. She had no doubt which category the man stalking her belonged to.

She started walking faster. Despite the cold, she was soaked in perspiration, her blouse sticking to her skin. What the hell was she supposed to do now? It was a mistake to turn into this quiet little street. What was she thinking?

She'd never seen the man in the leather jacket before, but she was sure he was sent by the people she'd confronted near the office a couple of days ago. Hagos had told her explicitly to steer clear of them, but she couldn't hold back. Her mother was right. "My little Michal has a knack for getting into trouble," she liked to say with a sigh.

Two months had elapsed since she went to the Police Department's Economic Crime Unit. That was the first thing she did when Hagos was deported. She reported what Hagos had told her about the "Banker." She'd even managed to snap a picture of him coming out of a restaurant on Fein Street, and she handed that over, too.

But meanwhile, nothing had changed. The "Banker," whose name she still didn't know, continued to walk free around the old bus station. When she saw him there again the day before yesterday, she couldn't control herself. She was just coming from a shift at the women's shelter on Neveh Sha'anan Street, an experience that invariably left her feeling depressed, when she saw him mingling with a group of refugees, strutting around cockily in his fancy suit as if all was right with the world. She accosted him in the street, screaming that he was an extortionist bastard, a filthy crook whose money funded rape, smuggling, torture, and slavery. She didn't give a second thought to the women peeking out in fear from behind the curtains. He looked at her with a mixture of shock and bewilderment. It seemed like he was about to say something, but before he did, two goons, obviously his bodyguards, grabbed her by the arms and dragged her away, and none too gently, either. The "Banker" vanished into an alley, fleeing like the chicken he was. His goons released her and walked away. But she wasn't finished. She followed them up the street, yelling, "Scumbags, maniacs, gangsters." Passersby stared at her in astonishment. "Who do you work for? Who gets the money?" she screamed at them. She was positive the "Banker" and his goons were only a link in a bigger chain, that someone more powerful was calling the shots, most likely a large crime syndicate that spread its tentacles out in all directions, destroying, devastating, exploiting, crushing. They ignored her. As soon as they reached the corner, a car pulled up beside them and they disappeared inside.

That's what happens, she thought. When the government doesn't provide basic services, a vacuum is created, and that vacuum is filled

by all sorts of scum. When people don't have work, they drink and shoot up; when they don't have doctors, they go to back-alley abortionists; when they can't use a proper bank, they turn to the "Banker," whose organization rakes in millions. The refugees had no choice. They couldn't walk around all day with everything they owned on their back. They needed loans to survive and a way to transfer their earnings to their families back in Africa. The government turned a blind eye, it didn't want to know, creating an opportunity for ruthless thugs to take advantage of the weak and impoverished.

She knew all too well that her screaming wouldn't make any difference. The "Banker" would continue to demand money and the refugees would continue to pay exorbitant interest. But at least now they'd know they were being watched, that they couldn't just blithely go about their business, because despite what they might think, somebody cared. Michal also wanted to give meaning to Hagos's death, maybe even make up in some small way for the fact that she wasn't able to prevent his deportation. Hagos wouldn't have been happy about her attempt to get at the "Banker," but that would just be fear talking, the result of the defenselessness imposed on people like him by the establishment.

She turned her head again. The man was still following her, gazing straight at her. She realized he didn't care that she could see his face. In fact, it seemed as if he wanted her to. She started running, slowly at first and then faster. She could hear his steps quickening until he was running behind her. The sound of his footsteps hitting the sidewalk reverberated through her body.

She couldn't let herself feel scared, and more to the point, she couldn't let them see she was scared.

"What do you want?" she said, stopping suddenly and turning around. She was breathing heavily.

He stood and stared at her in silence, his eyes trained on hers. There was no one else around. A cat wailed, making her jump.

"Why are you following me?" she asked. Her mouth was dry.

He didn't move, just kept looking at her with a blank expression on his face.

"Who do you work for?" she persisted. Her breathing was still not steady. His silence was threatening.

Hearing footsteps approaching from the other end of the street, Michal swung her head around. A second man in a black leather jacket was walking toward her. He could have been a twin of the first one. She stood caught between them, not knowing which way to turn. Her heart was pounding. She had to do something—now! "What do you want from me?" she asked, not managing to keep the tremor out of her voice. She was willing to sacrifice her life for something meaningful, but not like this, not without accomplishing something first, not when she was just getting started.

The first man advanced toward her. She wanted to scream, but she was paralyzed by fear, unable to move a muscle or force any sound out. Why had she come down this street? She'd played into their hands.

He stopped no more than a yard away and she thought she saw his right arm move. He was going to hit her. She threw her arm up to shield her face, but his hand shot out, grabbed her raised arm, and twisted it behind her. A kick to her knee made her drop to the ground. The pain was agonizing. She struggled, but they didn't let up. Her face was slammed into the cold asphalt by a blow to the nape of her neck. Her nose and mouth filled with blood. One of the men flipped her over, sat on top of her, and gripped her throat with one hand, bringing his face close to hers. She got a strong whiff of inexpensive cologne that made her stomach turn. She tried kicking at him to free herself, but it was useless. She didn't want to die. Not here. Not now. Not like this.