



JANE BERMAN

**UNKOSHER**  
**SLAUGHTER**

## PROLOGUE

### *Kibbutz Kerem El*

A blast of wind slammed the door shut as Reb Elijah Lachmann teetered onto the path that led from his cottage to the synagogue. Instinctively, his hand clamped his skullcap down tight. Through veils of dust, the cypresses in his front garden swayed like giants.

*Old man, your mind is playing games with you.* The lanes were deserted, the neighbors' houses shuttered. Street lamps glimmered through a mustard-colored swirl. Sand choked the Rebbe's nose and mouth and he bent over heaving, wracked by the cough that had taken root in his lungs.

The wind socked into him, plastering his coat against his body and unfurling his sidelocks into silver ribbons. *Old man, your body is rust and old bone. Soon you'll be rid of it, thank God.* Though the prospect of meeting the Creator had lifted his spirits, flesh dragged him earthward and he longed to return to his study and a glass of hot lemon tea.

But the caller had pleaded urgency. *Rebbe, I've searched my heart, and I must confess. The shul, please,* and since the Rebbe knew every nuance of the caller's voice, had touched the void within the caller's soul, and because that soul was so dear to him, he'd laid his volume of Talmud aside and reached for his coat.

Had his sermon that morning made an impact, after all? As always, on the Sabbath before Passover, the synagogue was crammed with worshippers, and so it was that morning despite the heat. From his armchair on the dais, Reb Elijah surveyed his people, third and fourth generation on Kibbutz Kerem El; men in blue-striped prayer shawls flowing from their shoulders, women fanning themselves with prayer books up in the gallery, children toddling down the aisles.

A group of men had rushed in through the back door, whispering apologies. Their pony tails, earrings and embroidered caps marked them as bohemians from the artists' village down the mountain. Most likely they had come by car, a probability that made Reb Elijah feel uncomfortable, Jews violating the Sabbath especially for his sermon.

Wiping sweat from his beard, the Rebbe pulled himself up and trudged over to the lectern. Children were shooed outside; only coughs and the nagging of the wind punctuated the silence.

He'd worked on the sermon all night, but as he began to speak, he abandoned the text. His voice rumbled inside his skull, as if an avalanche brewing within him threatened to flatten the congregation. He swung from side to side, arms striking the air. A murmur rippled through the crowd, then bursts of sound, shouts. Someone—someone he knew well—he couldn't remember who—jumped onto the dais and put an arm around his shoulders, wrapping his prayer shawl around

him. He was led out the side door of the synagogue where his daughter, Malkie, had run to meet him, her eyes glazed with fright.

*—Abba, what's happened to you? Those accusations you made....*

*—He who understands, understands.*

Now, struggling to open the door of the synagogue, Reb Elijah realized that his words had struck their target and that here in the house of prayer, please God, justice would be done.

The synagogue was dim, except for the flame that burned above the Ark. The Rebbe inhaled the smells of dust and prayer books and the faint scent of perfume that floated down from the women's gallery. And another scent as well. A figure emerged from one of the pews.

*"Shalom, Rebbe."*

*"Shalom to you too. May the new week be a favorable one." "God willing." A nod of the head.*

The Rebbe sank down in the pew facing the *bima*, the platform on which the Torah scrolls were read. His leg ached and he felt weariness tug at him like a petulant child. He thought of bed, if only he could lie down...

But he'd been summoned. He lifted his head to meet the familiar gaze of his caller. "There was something you had to tell me. You searched your heart, you said."

When the voice answered, it was dreamlike, mournful. "Yes, Rebbe, I've searched, but truth be told, my heart is absent."

A chill rippled through the Rebbe's chest. He'd sensed the caller's empty heart for years and wondered how his companion would act now that its lack had surfaced to awareness.

The Rebbe got to his feet. He must be resolute despite his pity and love.

"I've told you, restitution must be made to those you've harmed. You must pay the price for your deeds. Otherwise, there is no forgiveness from God or man."

*"And if I don't, Rebbe.."* The voice was teasing.

“ As dear as you are to me, I will destroy you.”

He heard his voice echo in the silence that swelled up into the dome of the synagogue and felt foolish. *Old man, who gave you the mandate to destroy?*

There was a sound, a clucking of tongue against teeth. Two lengths of cord were retrieved from beneath the canopy that covered the lectern.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” For the first time, he felt the stirrings of fear.

But the voice didn’t reply. The figure grabbed his wrists and the Rebbe felt the cord cut into his flesh, then into his ankles. He tried to shout, but coughing smothered his voice, drowning it in bile.

“Rebbe, mount the *bima*, please.” *Please. Ever the polite one, even from the beginning.* Reb Elijah stumbled onto the platform and was pressed down by strong hands. He felt the parquet floor beneath him where he had stood thousands of times to chant from the Holy Torah.

*Shema, Israel*, he murmured together with the humming of the wind. He thought of his daughter, his many grandchildren, what he had done on earth, what he had left undone.

The slaughterer’s knife glinted in the upraised hand, and through the rise and fall of the wind, the Rebbe heard a voice. “Elijah, Elijah.” *Here I am.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Jerusalem*

Rachel Shine raked dust from her hair and cursed the hot wind lashing the city. As she wiped the countertops one last time, she wondered whether God had hurled down the *khamzin* to test her on the eve of Passover when every crevice had to be leaven-free. If so, she'd get an *F* for failure. Again.

She tossed a bucketful of water onto the balcony, the soapy liquid cooling her toes, then squeegeed it down to the courtyard where the scent of jasmine floated up from between cracked stones. Rachel took pride in the home she'd pieced together from a crumbling nineteenth-century stable outside the Old City walls, the kitchen overlooking a courtyard with a lemon tree and the original well. She'd planted begonias and rosemary among the bougainvillea and honeysuckle. On Friday nights, she'd sit on the balcony, wrapped in a quilt against the Jerusalem chill, lulled by the chants from the synagogues tucked into the alleyways that wove through Nahlaot.

Creating a home from rubble, she often thought, was like reassembling herself piece by piece, after the divorce.

Whatever love she and Nahum had shared since their youth movement days had withered throughout the years of childlessness. Stubbornly refusing to undergo fertility tests, Nahum had blamed her. A guru rabbi from Mea Shearim had tightened the strictures that bound their lives, convincing Nahum that it was Rachel's lax observance that prevented them from fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Her husband's piety soared while she inched further and further away from religion.

First she abandoned her headscarf, loosening her wavy amber-colored hair, then dared insert the amber earrings that were her talisman; the prehistoric insects frozen within reminded her of Nahum. She'd never allow herself to feel trapped again.

After the divorce, when she ran into him on Jaffa Road, he'd avert his eyes from her long slim legs and bare arms. Little did he realize that their holy wars battled within Rachel herself. At thirty-four, she still felt guilty about thrusting her orthodox life aside.

So she koshered her kitchen for Passover, though she'd be with her parents for the full eight days and packed a long skirt for *shul*. As for the Eleventh Commandment, *Thou shalt phone thy mother twice a day to reassure her that thou art still breathing*, she dried her bare feet on a clean floor rag, glanced at the clock—it was just after seven—and picked up the phone.

No answer. Strange, since Aviva was obsessively organized, especially at Passover time. It was possible she'd run down to the mini-market for one more jar of horseradish, one more box of *matza* “just in case,” though they'd be having a small *seder*—just Rachel, her parents and her old friend, Alona Golan. Her brother, Michael, who lived with his wife and eight children in a West Bank settlement, was spending the holiday with his in-laws.

The floor trembled, trucks rumbling up Agrippas Street to the Mahane Yehuda *shuk* where shoppers would be waiting impatiently for the unloading of fruits and vegetables, thick carcasses of beef and freshly slaughtered chickens.

Rachel's heart skidded and her hands began to shake as images ripped through her head. Butchery. Flayed ribs. Shredded flesh. The odor of charred bodies.

*Oh God, not now..*

The severed head of the suicide bomber rose in her mind like a livid sun. He'd been no more than sixteen, his hair neatly parted in the middle of his scalp. That had struck her more than anything, more than the body parts strewn around her or the blood on her face. She'd stared at it, murmuring over and over, *Someone once bathed and diapered and kissed you and combed your hair.*

She stumbled to the sofa, where she lay rigid and shut her eyes, visualizing a frozen lake, birch trees bent under snow. Icicles in her hair, her limbs congealing with cold. Frigid silence to help the panic wind down

It'd been shock, of course. After her hospitalization—two weeks in the trauma ward at Hadassah—she felt slightly ashamed of that moment of compassion for the monster that had just blown up fifteen teenagers outside a pizza parlor.

*Save your pity for the victims*, Aviva had said, flicking the wings of her headscarf over her shoulder. *Besides, look what he did to you—and you're a therapist, for Pete's sake!* As if that had been the ultimate travesty.

Rachel opened her eyes as the attack subsided. On wobbly legs, she walked to the refrigerator and downed cold water straight from the pitcher.

Four sharp raps from Beethoven's *Fifth* sounded at the door, followed by a musical, "*Boker tov, motek!*"

Choking on the last gulp of water, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Rachel injected as much normality into her voice as she could muster. "Just a sec'."

She unlocked the door and Miri walked in, but froze as she glanced at Rachel's face.

"Hey, you're white as plaster," she said, adding guardedly, "Don't tell me you've heard." Her powder blue eyes widened against dusky skin.

"Heard what?" Rachel barely processed what Miri was saying. Her head felt stuffed with cotton wadding.

Miri avoided her glance and headed for the kitchenette where she reached for the coffee grinder and switched on the electric kettle. As the fog in her brain lifted, Rachel noticed the restraint in her friend's normally fluid movements. Miri belonged to a fringe modern dance troupe, but her main source of income was the embroidered bridal canopies she designed and which sold for thousands of shekels each. For Rachel, their friendship was a canopy, a shelter against the gusts that threatened to topple her equanimity.

"Make the coffee strong," she said, curling her legs beneath her on the couch once again. "I just had an attack. All the snow in Siberia couldn't pull me out of it this time."

Miri poured. "Three sugars. No backtalk now; your body needs it." She blew off the steam and placed the mug into Rachel's cupped hands.

"You're a lifesaver, you know." With the first scalding sip, Rachel felt the earth tilt back on its axis again.

Uncharacteristically silent, Miri eased herself down onto the tile floor, fingers tracing the interlocking patterns of cobalt and yellow. The skin between her eyebrows puckered.

"What?" Rachel prodded.

"I'm not sure I'm such a lifesaver," Miri muttered, "after I tell you why I came."

Rachel's heart contracted. *Have you heard?* Miri had said.

"I'm not an invalid. Spit it out."

"Look, there might be nothing to it," Miri said rapidly. "Yaniv phoned me a few minutes ago. Something came through from the precinct near your kibbutz." Yaniv was Miri's boyfriend, a

policeman on the Jerusalem Police Fraud Squad. A sweet guy, Rachel thought, but with hardly any time for Miri. *Never date a cop*, Miri always warned.

“Get on with it.”

She took a sip of coffee, her eyes fastened on Rachel’s face.

“Someone died up there.”

“Died? Why would Yaniv get to hear about that?”

“Because it wasn’t a natural death.” Miri rose from the floor and sat next to Rachel on the sofa.

“Someone was killed...murdered.”

“Murdered?” Her thoughts tried desperately to connect.

She moistened her lips, which had suddenly dried up. “Who?” “Your rabbi.”

A swell of relief washed over her. It was a mistake; Yaniv had misunderstood, and so had Miri. There was no *rabbi* on Kerem El.

“Rachel?” That cotton wool sensation again. Why was Miri’s voice coming from such a distance, though she was right up against her on the sofa?

To her surprise, her own voice rang out clearly. “You’ve got it all wrong. We don’t have a rabbi, we don’t need a rabbi. We have the Rebbe, Reb Elijah.”

“Put my foot in it again,” Miri muttered, gently turning Rachel’s face towards her. “But that’s who I meant, *motek*. I meant *Rebbe* Elijah.”

A gust of wind rattled the window panes. Rachel hugged her arms to her chest. *How chilly it is, when it ought to be so hot.*

“Look at me,” Miri was whispering and shouting at the same time. “Rachel, *look* at me!” She was holding the coffee to Rachel’s lips. It was cloyingly sweet, but reviving. She felt as though she were swimming to the surface to reach Miri, trying to twist her thoughts around what she had said.

“Good girl,” Miri nodded when Rachel had drained the mug.

“Reb Elijah, murdered.” Something was wrong with the juxtaposition of the two words. Why would anyone want to murder him?

“It was a terrorist, wasn’t it?” Her heart started pounding again. “My God, a terrorist got into Kerem El.”

But Miri was shaking her head back and forth, her ebony curls slapping her cheeks like baby fists. She gripped Rachel’s shoulders.



“It’s not *like* that,” she said. “I’ll tell you what Yaniv heard and we’ll figure out where to take it from there.”

Rachel took a deep breath. “I’m okay. Just tell me what you know.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I want to hear the worst, that’s all. Don’t worry about me.” Seized by the need to move, Rachel began pacing, her hands clasped around the back of her neck. Through the kitchen window, she saw that a rust-colored cloud had mantled the city.

Miri eyed her warily. “The Rebbe was found this morning by the woman who cleans the synagogue.”

“In the synagogue?” Rachel stopped in her tracks.

“Yes, and what’s so strange is that the person kneeling next to the...Rebbe...was that weird son-in-law of his.”

“Shmaya?” Her thoughts careened. Shmaya Catz, the husband of the Rebbe’s only daughter, her oldest friend. “Poor Malkie!”

“There’s more,” Miri said dryly.

Rachel clamped down her rampaging thoughts. “Not now. I’ll hear it soon enough.” Rachel grabbed her hand and marched her off to the small bedroom down the corridor. “I’ve got to get to Kerem El. What Malkie must be going through!” She pulled clothes from drawers and closets, tossing them helter-skelter on the bed.

Miri stood in the doorway, arms folded. “You’d better hear the whole story before you tear yourself up there.”

“So I can have a panic attack while driving?” She stuffed sweaters, jeans, a skirt and matching jacket into the suitcase along with underwear and jewelry. After a moment’s hesitation, she threw in her set of whittling knives.

Miri sighed. “What do you need those for?”

“Just in case.” She gave her friend a swift hug. “I’ll phone you. Make sure to water my plants, take in my mail and... my brain’s turned to mush...turn the lights on and off every couple of days.”

Hammering pummeled the roof, muffling her final words.

She kneeled on the bed and reached over to unfasten the shutters. “Look!” She motioned for Miri to join her. “The *khamsin*’s over. The rain’s started.”

Rust-colored water sluiced through the alleyways of Nahlaot. “It looks like blood to me,” Miri whispered, staring through the glass.

\* \* \*

Chief-Inspector Absalom Brill felt as comfortable in a synagogue as a vegan in a steakhouse. Yet, here he was at seven a.m. with a dead rabbi on his plate, so to speak.

He swallowed the dislike with which he viewed the *haredim*, as the black-hatted pious Jews were called. To him, they were insular and fundamentalist, with enough political clout to drag Israel down into an ayatollah state.

Eyeing Shmaya Catz, the victim’s son-in-law, who was rocking back and forth in one of the pews and praying from a small *siddur*, psalms maybe—Absalom had skipped most of his Bible classes in high school—he knew his prejudices were getting the best of his professionalism, and not for the first time.

He turned his back on the *haredi*, skirted the bloodsplashed *bima* in the center of the large hall, and walked over to the front of the synagogue, where the body waited and the forensics people were packing up. His knowledge of synagogue architecture never got beyond his bar mitzvah lessons with old Rabbi Tessler, who’d taught him that Jews prayed toward Jerusalem, toward the wall against which the Torah Ark stood. Here, the Ark was framed by stained glass, etched with the symbols of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. On most mornings, Absalom figured, the Lion of Judah would blossom into magenta flames with the light of the rising sun, but now the sky outside was leaden, the big cat a tame and lifeless gray.

He glanced up the steep narrow steps leading to the women’s gallery and pondered what the point was of having such a magnificent synagogue if religious women, who were constantly pregnant or holding small children and were at least half the population, had to struggle to get second class seats in which to pray.

But what puzzled him most about the place was its opulence. Absalom recognized wealth when he saw it: gold fittings, velvet curtains, chandeliers, the marble floor, smeared now with blood and streaks of mud. And the size. At least four stories high, with turrets and a domed ceiling painted with silver stars. While knowing little about his religion, he knew a lot about kibbutzim and their modest communal way of life. Though this was changing, Kerem El seemed too conservative to

be in the vanguard of those changes. He wondered where the money came from. Rich American Jews? *Protektzia* at the Ministry of Religious Affairs? He was ready to place his bets on the latter.

Interrupting his thoughts, the pathologist from Abu Kabir handed him a clipboard with forms to sign. Absalom gazed at the body bag on the gurney.

“Make sure he’s given priority. They told me he can’t be buried later than noon tomorrow because the holiday comes in at around six.”

The other man made a face. “Tell me about it. We’re at my in-laws for the *seder*. I bet you never ate *matza* balls like my wife’s mother makes. Heavy enough to sink a battleship.”

Absalom didn’t smile, only stood silently as the body was wheeled through the rear door, accompanied by sobs from the gathering crowd, the whirring of T.V. cameras and the subdued drone of reporters. Word of the murder had raced through the small mountain community and the media, momentarily pushing aside the news of the latest drive-by shooting. Though his precinct was only a few kilometers away, he’d never set foot in Kerem El. A strange hybrid, he thought, a settlement run by religious Jews where the members worked the fields and lived an orthodox life. He’d heard of such places, but had never visited one. *Nothing like murder to broaden one’s horizons.*

The *haredi* had wound up his prayers and was settling down in the pew, eyes uplifted to the vaulted dome. In his thirties, bearded, with a fleshy midriff, he wore the black jacket and white shirt of his “trade,” but both were caked with blood. So was the hand that clutched the prayer book.

Absalom exchanged looks with his partner, Yossi Gottwein, who was lounging next to the son-in-law, a “now-I’ve-seeneverything” smirk on his turnip-shaped face. “*Meshugga*,” he mouthed, pointing a twirling finger at his head. Ignoring him, Absalom slid into the pew.

“Shmaya,” he said softly. No reaction, no sign that the *haredi* had heard him. The man’s eyes, dark as charcoal, swept the star-studded ceiling.

Absalom coughed. Revolted by the blood, by the man’s butcher-like build and the sweat that oozed from him, he rapped Shmaya’s knee sharply with a pen to grab his attention. Flinching, Shmaya stared down at his right hand.

Absalom tried again. “Do you know who I am?”

The *haredi* continued to gaze at his blood-soaked hand, while Yossi shook his head. “We can’t get zilch from this guy. Let’s take him down to the station.”

Absalom had no patience for Yossi's impulsiveness. Shmaya was about ready to crack from tension. Taking him over to the station would be counterproductive. The man needed the right atmosphere, here in the synagogue, surrounded by the ritual props he knew so well.

"A man is dead. Do you know who he is?"

The *haredi* shifted on the hard wooden seat. "The Rebbe. Malkie's father."

Absalom nodded. *We're getting somewhere. At least he's plugged into something that resembles reality.*

"Your hand is covered with blood, Shmaya. Why is that?"

The *haredi* gazed down at his hand. "*A pure bull, without blemish, as a sacrificial offering,*" he mumbled.

Absalom was beginning to understand. "A sacrificial offering? The rabbi, you mean?"

Shmaya faced him, his lips beneath the thick beard pursed in reproof. "The *Rebbe*, Reb Elijah."

*Rabbi, rebbe, what difference does it make?* Absalom thought, but he said solemnly, "I stand corrected. Why was the Rebbe a sacrificial offering?"

Shmaya groaned and began rocking to and fro. "So that the abomination of the godless one will cease."

Absalom kept his face expressionless, as if they were discussing a traffic ticket. "And who is the godless one whose abominations must cease?"

The meaty shoulders slumped as Shmaya Catz stared at the row of prayer books lined up on the reading stand in front of him.

"I am," he sighed.

Yossi blinked. "Is that a confession, or what?"

"We'll soon see." Drawing a deep breath, Absalom tried to snare the *haredi's* gaze. "Shmaya," he said gently, "are you saying you killed your father-in-law?"

Shmaya's head bowed, then rose, then bowed again. It was the nod of a man whose shoulders sagged under a burden. "God help me, it was me. I killed him."

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised on the mean streets of 1950's Brooklyn, Jane Berman has always been fascinated by crime fiction. She has devoured everything from Nancy Drew and Agatha Christie to contemporary mysteries set in far-flung locations. Writing a murder mystery of her own was only a matter of time.

In 1969 she became an idealistic immigrant to Israel and immersed herself in her new country. The rich cultural and political landscape has become the backdrop of her first published novel.

Recently retired from a long English teaching career, Jane now writes full time, always with a strong cup of coffee at her elbow. She shares her mountaintop home in northern Israel with her husband. She has three children, five grandchildren, and three cats that rule the house with an iron paw.