October's Ashes

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Prologue—Oct. 7, 2023

"Open your phone!"

Yariv jerked, hot coffee splashing over his hand. Orly's voice cut through the morning with a sharpness he hadn't heard since reserve duty years ago.

"What? What is it?" He fumbled for his phone, the camera refusing to recognize his unshaven, caffeine-starved face.

Orly ran toward him, phone clutched like a lifeline. "Did you see it? Dozens shot—hundreds maybe—at a music festival near Gaza. The kibbutzim are burning."

Water streamed from her hair onto her robe, indistinguishable from tears.

Yariv could almost smell the diesel, the scorched metal, the oily dust of the tank floor—and the knot in his gut told him what the broadcast couldn't: this war was coming for them, too.

Chapter One—December, 2023

Yariv checked his watch, opened the oven, and fogged his glasses in a blast of heat. “Fifteen minutes,” he said, sliding the salmon in.

Idan, perpetually hungry in the way only a sixteen-year-old can be, appeared in the kitchen like a mushroom after rain. The smell of hummus drew him to the counter. “Good. I’m starving.”

“Well, he’s not here yet,” Orly said, leaning against the counter, her hair pinned neatly at the nape of her neck. “So it’ll be a while before we sit down. Have a snack.”

“No need to tell *me* twice.” Idan grabbed a handful of crackers and dipped them into the bowl.

“Hey! That’s for when our guest arrives. Take something else.”

“Too late.” He licked his fingers. “Mmm. Not bad, Abba. Maybe a little more salt?”

Ron, the eldest Brickman, waltzed in wearing shorts and a tank top, dropping to the floor for push-ups. “Abba, was Benny Natanson really your commanding officer?”

Yariv wiped his hands with a dish towel. “He was. Now finish your exercises and put on a shirt.”

“Cool.” Ron kept counting, voice rising between breaths. “So what’s his rank now?”

“Retired. Back then he was a captain and I was a sergeant first class.”

“I’m going to be an officer,” Ron said, still pumping out push-ups. “Infantry—not stuck in a tank like you.”

“Let’s have that discussion later.” Yariv opened the oven again and checked the salmon. “You might want to consider a few things before you enlist.”

“Enlisting?” Leora flicked her thumb toward her brother. “Why would you join an army that supports the colonization of another people’s land?”

“Go hug a tree, sis.”

Leora folded her arms. “Fascist.”

“Enough!” Yariv raised his hands. The protests had already taken their toll on campus—the last thing he wanted was a repeat performance at home. “Leora, promise me you won’t insult our guest tonight.”

Leora rolled her eyes. “I don’t insult anyone. But what did you say his title was? Director of Strategic Affairs? Is stealing Palestinian land strategic? Can I ask him that?”

“Leora!” Orly’s face tightened. “He’s our guest. Please behave.”

“She can’t help it,” said Ron, brushing off his hands as he stood. “The far-left progressives have hijacked her brain.”

“Fascist!”

Leora stormed down the hall and slammed her door.

"I'm fed up with her," Orly said. "Her views are bad enough, but calling her brother a fascist? I'd rather she stayed in her dorm."

Yariv shrugged. "Come on, Orly. Let her say her piece and get it out of her system. It's a phase—a fad. It'll pass. Just like her South Beach diet or that Hare Krishna phase."

Orly snorted but didn't answer.

When the salmon was ready, Yariv rested the Pyrex tray on the island, glanced toward the hallway, and lowered his voice. "Just going to the bathroom," he called, turning the corner and tapping gently on Leora's door.

"Yes?"

"Can I come in?"

Silence.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said, easing the door open.

Leora sat on the bed, knees drawn to her chest. Fair and freckled, she still looked more child than adult—innocent and righteous in equal measure, a combination that made her dangerous. He sat on the edge of the bed, exhaling slowly. "Leora, please come have dinner with us. Just one meal without politics."

She shook her head. "He's with the consulate—sent by a right-wing government that's backing a campaign to kill innocent people in Gaza. How can I sit at the table with him—or with Ron?"

Yariv looked down at his hands. This was the heart of it—complex, historical, impossible to untangle. “Leora, I respect your compassion. No innocent should suffer—on either side. But two months ago, over a thousand Israelis were murdered and taken hostage. Women, children, grandparents. What would you call it if one of them were ours?” He met her eyes, searching for a glimmer of understanding. “What if one of our family members had been dragged into those tunnels?”

“So Israel just retaliates and kills ten times more Gazans?” Leora’s voice was low now, but charged, as though someone else were whispering through her.

Yariv had been through this argument a hundred times in the past eight weeks—really, his whole adult life in America. There was never middle ground. To nationalist Israelis and many conservative Jews, he was naïve at best, a traitor at worst. To the far left, the BDS activists, the loudest campus voices—he was a Zionist apologist. Caught between bad breath and body odor, he thought grimly. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

He forced his attention back to his daughter. “I don’t think it’s revenge, Leora. Israel wants its hostages back. Hamas doesn’t seem to understand anything except force.”

“But innocent children? It’s sick.”

He sighed, this time letting the air leave his lungs in one long stream. “Leora, please—come have dinner. Just tonight, no politics. It’s hard enough without fighting each other.”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms. “But if your guest or Ron—or even Ima—starts in, I’m not keeping quiet.”

"Fair enough." He gave a tired half-smile. "Just try, okay? One evening without a war at the table."

Yariv opened the door and ushered in their guest. Benny Natanson strode in, shook Yariv's hand, and kissed Orly briskly on each cheek.

"Shalom, Shabbat shalom."

"Nice to meet you," Orly said. "Yariv's told us plenty about your army days together."

Benny raised his eyebrows at Yariv and winked at Orly. "Not all bad, I hope."

Orly laughed—too loudly, Yariv thought—while he managed only a polite smile. They led their guest to the table and introduced the children.

As they passed the challah, Benny said, "Yariv, will you do the *HaMotzi*?"

Before Yariv could answer, Leora spoke. "We don't praise God in our family. If we credit Him—or Her—for the bread, we'd have to blame Him—or Her—for October 7th—for the hostages, and for the Gazan civilians being bombed."

Yariv wanted to crawl under the table. He agreed with every word, yet dreaded the argument he knew was coming.

Across from him, Orly's face flushed with embarrassment. She'd longed for closeness with Leora, but lately every exchange left a bruise. Yariv could feel the unspoken accusation

radiating from her—*this is your doing.* He'd never heard her say it outright, but suspected she believed he indulged their daughter's moral rebellions.

Benny, unfazed, broke into a grin. "Tradition!" he boomed, in a perfect *Fiddler on the Roof* baritone. "You don't have to be religious to say *HaMotzi*."

The tension eased, if only slightly. As plates filled with salmon and basmati rice, Ron leaned forward. "Abba said you were his commanding officer in the tank unit."

Benny seemed to brighten, his ears pricking like a dog who'd just heard the treat cupboard open. "I was. Your abba was a fine gunner. But that was a long time ago. Before I retired, I was a colonel—commanded a brigade in southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights."

"Cool," Ron said, grinning, while Leora rolled her eyes. "I'm enlisting soon—but in infantry. That's where the real action is."

"*Kol hakavod,*" Benny replied. "You're a credit to your family. We need every soldier we can get right now, with so many fronts threatening us."

Ron glowed under the praise. Before Leora could respond—her expression already sharpening—Orly cut in. "Benny, tell us about your work at the consulate."

Yariv noticed the way her gaze lingered on him—how animated she seemed, almost dazzled. Benny, tall and broad-shouldered, had that easy charisma of men used to command.

Stabbing at a piece of salmon, Benny set his fork down on the plate's rim. "Well, as you know, Israel's had some issues with *hasbara*—its public relations efforts abroad. My role,

sanctioned by the government, is to make sure Israel doesn't get blindsided by the American media."

Yariv hesitated. He didn't want another argument—especially not with Leora listening—but the phrasing grated. "Did you say *the government*?" he asked. "Didn't you mean *the country*?"

"What's the difference?" Orly said lightly. "The government represents the country."

He shook his head. "Not anymore. After October 7th, they lost the public's trust. They should've resigned in disgrace. They were warned—too busy pushing that judicial overhaul to see what was coming."

"Yariv," Orly said, her tone sharp, "enough. Benny's just doing his job." She smiled at their guest, an apology flickering across her face.

Benny lifted a hand. "It's fine. But we're at war now. We don't criticize our own government during wartime. We need unity."

Yariv forced a smile and reached for his glass. The clink of cutlery filled the silence. Conversation drifted back to safer ground—movies, travel, anything but politics. Yet beneath it all, Yariv felt the ground shift—the fragile tremor of a family cracking along its fault lines.

Chapter Two—December, 2023

Yariv Brickman always arrived early—not out of eagerness, but habit. Years ago, it was nerves. These days, it was the damn passwords—stacked like nested Russian Matryoshka dolls. "I need a password to get into my password keeper," he muttered, stabbing at his phone, already sweating under the fluorescent lights.

After twenty years of teaching neurophysiology, academia still circled back on itself: new data, new jargon, new grant formats—same long hours. He'd long stopped counting NIH renewals, or papers published; the real markers of time were faces. Most of his students were only a few years older than his younger son, Idan—sixteen—and roughly the same age as his older one, Ron, now in his early twenties. Soon enough, he thought, they'd be the age of his grandchildren. A girl in the front row had hair the color of green fluorescent protein—Leora would've approved.

His daughter's earrings once dangled tiny signs that read *Save the Planet.* He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd handed her laptop to a stranger on the subway. *I just hope she doesn't join some commune and give away all her material possessions.* Yariv smiled inwardly at the irony; he, a product of a spartan kibbutz upbringing, worrying that his own daughter might embrace socialist ideals. But he knew that wasn't really the issue. Passionately idealistic people were easy marks for those who took advantage of conviction. That was his real concern—along with her constant clashes with Ron and Orly.

Something in Orly had shifted after October 7th. Sure, the attack had shaken every Israeli—and even many American Jews, usually more distant from Israel's daily struggles, seemed suddenly raw, as if a nerve had been struck that hadn't ached so sharply since the

Holocaust—or for Americans, 9/11. But Orly's reaction went deeper. She'd grown tense, impatient, quick to anger. Just last week, she'd snapped at easygoing Idan for humming an Arabic pop song he'd picked up on TikTok. "Not in this house," she'd barked, slamming her glass on the table. The poor kid hadn't even realized what he was singing.

She seemed convinced now that moderation was a weakness Israel could no longer afford. Yariv knew the pattern: every terror attack in Israel's history had pushed the political center further right. Fanatics on one side always bred zeal on the other—it was the math of mistrust. But this time, the shift felt personal. He could sense Orly's growing impatience with his own middle-of-the-road views—his belief that empathy didn't have to mean weakness.

The students had begun to colonize the classroom, filling the lecture hall with purple hair, tattoos, and those oversized water jugs this generation lugged around like survival gear—as though the New York campus were a desert, and without hydration they might wither on the spot. He thought back to his own undergraduate years at the Hebrew University: all post-military students, mostly in their mid-twenties, all working their way through. No football teams, no cheering squads, no frats or parties. A different age, a different reality. His own kids were living the American campus life—for better or worse.

Yariv watched the clock approach nine and stepped to the podium. After greeting the students, he recapped the previous lecture and launched into the new material. As he described the function of synaptic neurons, a murmur rippled through the hall—phones lifted, screens flashing. He squinted toward the back rows, trying to make sense of the disruption.

Then a student stood and shouted: *"Free Palestine! From the river to the sea, Palestine shall be free!"*

The words hit him like a ricochet. Before he could react, a deafening blast cracked the air—sharp, metallic, wrong. His stomach dropped. The smell of scorched metal seared his brain, and suddenly he was twenty again, lying in the dirt, cradling Uri's head, blood warm on his hands.

"Incoming!" he shouted, diving behind the podium. "Everybody down! Get down!"

Instead of students responding, he heard muffled laughter and fresh shouts of *"Free Palestine!"* A girl near the aisle flinched; a boy in a varsity hoodie stared at his shoes; another lifted his phone, torn between filming and fleeing. The firecracker had set off ringing echoes in the acoustically designed room, and Yariv saw the student chanting—keffiyeh wrapped stylishly around his neck.

Even after the echoes died, his ears kept ringing—the sound of another life. Climbing slowly to his feet, knees still trembling with adrenaline, Yariv faced the boy. "This is a class in neuroscience, not a political rally," he said, voice steadier than he felt. "Please leave the classroom."

"From the river to the sea!" the student shouted again, brandishing another firecracker. "Zionist professors don't belong here! The campus is complicit in genocide!"

He stormed out, slamming the door behind him. Silence followed—thick, vibrating. The neuron diagram still glowed on the screen, absurdly clinical against the fading echo of the blast.

Yariv tried to resume the lecture—words spilling out by habit—but no one was listening. A girl in the second row shut her laptop. Another quietly gathered her things.

"Are you okay, Professor?" someone asked from the back, uncertain whether to stay or flee.

He nodded automatically, though he wasn't sure what *okay* meant anymore. The room blurred; for an instant he was back in another country, another war.

Time seemed to stop. He remembered survivors saying their lives had flashed before their eyes. It was no coincidence he'd ended up in the U.S. Orly had objected when he'd insisted they stay after his postdoc—her parents and brothers were all in Israel. *Yariv, as Jews we can only really feel safe in Israel. You know that, right?*

She'd always had a patriotic streak, one he'd lost after two soldiers in his unit were killed by a roadside bomb in Lebanon. He caught himself—unfair, he thought. Orly had done her service; she'd earned her convictions. And she'd even supported Ron's decision to make Aliyah and enlist—arguably a greater sacrifice for a mother than her own.

"Ron, why don't you take a gap year first?" he'd said. *"Work with kids in low-income neighborhoods, get a feel for the country. Once you enlist, you can't turn back—you know that, right?"*

Ron had rolled his eyes. *"I know what I want—to be an infantry officer. Stop trying to talk me out of it, Abba."*

Middle ground had never been in Ron's nature. He was all or nothing—and he was all in for the all.

When the last student left, Yariv stood alone in the fluorescent quiet, the smell of burnt paper still ghosting his mind. He thought about calling Orly, then decided against it. There were some things she no longer wanted to hear.

He reached for his water bottle, but his hand trembled and missed. It toppled, water sloshing onto the floor—washing away the last traces of his belonging on campus.

Chapter Three—December, 2023

Leora Brickman paused at the corner, dug out her cork-leather, environmentally friendly wallet, pulled out a ten, and handed it to the young beggar. “Gracias, miss. City prices show no mercy. Maybe a twenty?”

She hesitated. His eyes weren’t pleading—just tired. Unable to find another ten, Leora handed him a twenty and moved on. She shook her head. *What was wrong with this country—the richest on the planet—if it couldn’t feed or shelter its poor? Not to mention health care itself.*

Her pulse quickened as Jason’s message flashed on her screen: Ziyad wanted to meet her. Ziyad—one of the leaders of the *PFP* group—*People for the Freedom of Palestine*. And he wanted *her* to join the core organizers’ meeting. *Her*. An unexpected honor that meant they valued her.

She pulled up the PFP mission statement on her phone, reading as she wove through the dense pedestrian traffic.

> *People for the Freedom of Palestine (PFP) is a grassroots coalition committed to advancing justice, dignity, and liberation for the Palestinian people.*

Leora read the opening line again. It stirred something in her. *Justice. Dignity.* Finally—words that meant something.

> *We oppose all forms of occupation, apartheid, and systemic oppression. We believe in the power of collective resistance to challenge Israeli violence and U.S.-backed militarism.*

Her eyes darted to that line. “Collective resistance.” It felt right. Urgent. Necessary. She had grown up hearing only one side. This was the other.

> *We do not recognize the legitimacy of a settler-colonial state founded on the displacement of an indigenous population.*

Her parents had grown up there—that was history. What mattered was who’d been pushed out.

> *Through education, direct action, and solidarity, we pressure institutions—academic, corporate, and governmental—to divest from entities that profit from war.*

She nodded. That was the point. Not just feelings—*action*. She didn’t need to know everything. Conviction mattered more.

> *Our vision is rooted in equity, and the belief that liberation for one is liberation for all.*

It felt almost spiritual. She whispered the last line to herself.

These were people of action—people who cared, who were committed. Who stood for the oppressed, for whom equality and justice were everything. Leora knew without a doubt that these were her true peers.

Her family didn’t see it that way. Ron had started interrupting her mid–sentence, rolling his eyes before she could finish a thought. Lately, he’d even mocked her posts online, calling

them “naïve little slogans.” She wasn’t sure exactly when he’d become like this—it had happened gradually. But it hurt.

She used to look up to her big brother—she loved him. Maybe still did. Once he’d protected her in ways she could never forget.

She recalled fishing a textbook from her locker at school when three boys had surrounded her. “Hey, flower child,” said the leader. “Wanna come suck our dicks?”

Eyes downcast, nausea rising, she’d been frozen— unsure what to say, terrified of what they might do if she did. Then out of nowhere, Ron had charged at them. “Stay away from my sister, you shitheads!” Broad-shouldered and six-foot-two, all muscle from weight training, he didn’t need to repeat himself. They backed off instantly.

But now? Ron had become dogmatic. Everything with him was black and white, and Israel was always white. She knew he was good at the core, but when it came to politics, he was blind.

Her mother was even harder to take. Since October 7th, Orly couldn’t talk about anything except hostages or the massacre; it was as though all the other evils in the world had vanished. Suddenly, there was no hunger, no toxic pesticides, no air pollution, no global warming—and worse, no Palestinian suffering. *Why couldn’t she see their pain?*

Just last weekend, they were watching CNN after dinner. When a reporter began showing wounded patients in a Gazan hospital after Israeli air strikes, Orly had muted the sound.

“Ima, turn it back on!” Leora snapped.

“Why?” her mother had asked. “So we can listen to that anti-Israel propaganda?”

“It’s not anti-Israel, Ima—it’s showing the victims of those air strikes.”

Her father had tried to intervene. “It’s awful. But Hamas is bringing it on its own people by refusing to release the hostages.”

Leora bristled. “Why are the people of Gaza to blame? If it’s Hamas that’s responsible, why is Israel bombing apartment buildings and schools?”

“Enough!” Orly shouted. “Most of them are Hamas supporters—what do you expect? They voted Hamas in as their leaders, and now they claim they’re victims? Please!”

Leora had stormed out, her hands shaking from outrage—and afterward decided to visit home less often. It was better to stay in the dorms with people who understood. Like Jason. And now maybe Ziyad.

She checked the navigation app on her phone and looked up. Here it was—the address Jason had sent. She entered the apartment building and climbed to the second floor. The paint peeled; a hallway bulb flickered. The air reeked of mildew and fried onions. She found 4A, the name “Rashid Thomas” scrawled in black marker beside the bell.

She rang. A tall black man opened the door. Behind him stood Jason.

“Come on in, Leora,” Jason said, “This is Rashid. He lets us use the place.”

Leora shook Rashid’s hand and stepped inside. The air was thick with smoke that burned her throat. She coughed, eyes watering, but said nothing. With all the suffering in Gaza, who was she to complain about a little cigarette smoke?

It was nearly 8 p.m. The group was settling into cheap folding chairs arranged in a semicircle around what passed for a living room.

Then, through the haze, a striking man appeared—broad-shouldered, dark wavy hair, a keffiyeh draped around his neck. Everyone rose, cheering as he entered. Jason leaned over. “That’s Ziyad,” he whispered.

Ziyad surveyed the room, smiling. “Welcome,” he said, his accent soft but deliberate. “As you know, the PFP—People for the Freedom of Palestine—meets regularly to plan our next steps.”

He paused, his gaze sweeping the circle. “It’s time to step up our game. The people of Gaza are suffering under brutal Israeli assault. We must show the Zionist and American imperialists that we will not stay silent—we will protest these attacks on innocent lives.”

The crowd began chanting: “From the river to the sea, Palestine shall be free!” A chill rippled through Leora, then a shiver of exhilaration. The rhythm took hold, and she joined in, the chant’s pulse merging with her own heartbeat.

Ziyad raised his hands, palms out. The room fell quiet. “I have tasks for everyone,” he said. He turned to a young woman with rainbow-dyed hair. “Suzanne—you’ll print copies of our charter and post them across campus. Every door. Every window. Leave no space uncovered.”

Suzanne nodded.

“Dennis and Rashid, help her,” Ziyad continued. “Jason and Marla, organize demonstrations. Get another bullhorn. I want a plan—where and when we set up tents on campus.”

Leora began to wonder if she’d be given a task—or if she was simply being tested. After all, her parents were Israeli. Maybe Ziyad didn’t fully trust her. But Jason had said he wanted her here.

Ziyad stood. “Oh—and Leora.” He looked directly at her. Her shoulders straightened; every eye turned toward her. “I may have a very special job for you.” Leora smiled—eager, nervous, proud—unaware of what she was walking into.

Chapter Four—December, 2023

Orly Brickman handed her driver's license to the armed guard and stepped through the metal detector into the Israeli consulate's Hanukkah event. Every Jewish or Israeli gathering in the city now had its own security detail—thick-necked men with rifles slung over their shoulders. *Feels just like Tel Aviv,* she thought. The familiarity both comforted and unnerved her.

The room felt sterile, despite the crowds of people milling around. There was a smell of floor polish mingled with candle wax dripping from the colored Hanukkah candles on the large *Hanukiah*—or candelabra. Though insulated from the outside world, she could hear the faint screams of sirens, as if to remind her that there was danger outside these walls. Her fingers brushed the thin silver chain beneath her blouse, a habit she'd picked up when worrying about her family in Israel during the *Second Intifada*, when suicide bombings were rampant.

This year's party barely qualified as a celebration. With hostages still trapped in Gazan tunnels, joy felt like bad manners. Still, families came. Children twirled dreidels beneath fluorescent lights while their parents pasted on smiles—bright enough for the kids, brittle to everyone else.

Orly moved through the crowd, scanning faces. She was exhausted—by the war, by the endless news cycle, by the battles in her own living room. "Give it a rest," Yariv had told her when she raged about how quickly the world had turned on Israel. "There's nothing more you—or anyone—can do."

Nothing more I can do? She'd wanted to scream. But what was the point? He seemed detached now, as though the bond between him and Israel had quietly frayed. Once, that

detachment had been what she admired in him—the steady counterweight to her own volatility. But since October 7th it had come to feel like abandonment. At night, when she scrolled through the Israeli news apps, watching parents bury their children or cry out in pain at their captivity in Gaza, Yariv would simply place a hand on her shoulder and whisper: *Enough*. It certainly wasn't cruelty—not even apathy; it was retreat. And she couldn't forgive him for it. He'd built his life on reasoning things through, while she'd learned that survival depended on refusing to reason, on acting first—flipping over tables when necessary—and asking later. The difference between them was no longer intellectual; it was cellular.

When he'd told her about the Palestinian student who threw a firecracker in his classroom, her horror had turned instantly to fury.

"Aren't you going to do anything about it? That could've been a grenade, not a toy."

"I reported it to the Dean's office," he'd said evenly. "What more can I do?"

"What more can you do?" she'd shot back, the words sharp enough to cut. "Go straight to the university president. Demand expulsion. Or quit—and write a full-page editorial in the *New York Times.*"

Yariv had leaned back, the way he always did when retreating into logic. She could almost see the gears turning behind his calm eyes. *Le'azazel*—damn it to hell. After a long pause, he leaned forward again, elbows on the table, verdict ready.

"Orly, if I quit, I'm throwing away my life's work because of one stupid kid. I don't control disciplinary policy. The university knows who he is. I have to assume they'll do the right thing. I'm a scientist, not a politician."

"Weren't you the one who taught me that saying about 'assume'—making an ass out of

you and me?" she said. Her voice was flat; she wasn't joking.

He smiled anyway. "So you do listen to me sometimes."

She shook her head. "Yeah. Too often."

A waiter passed with a tray of *sufganiyot.* Orly grabbed one, grateful for the distraction. American donuts were grotesque—those sugar-bombed monstrosities—but these looked like the real thing: golden, powder-dusted, jelly that burst warm against her tongue. For a second, she was in the home of her youth again, before the anger and exhaustion settled back in.

Her gaze swept the room. And then she saw him.

Benny Natanson moved through the crowd like he owned it—shaking hands, radiating easy confidence. Something in his bearing—the pressed suit, the faint smirk—tugged at a life she couldn't quite name. When his eyes found hers, his smile spread instantly, deliberate as a spotlight. He excused himself from a small circle of admirers, pivoted, and started toward her.

"Orly! Great to see you again."

His voice carried easily over the chatter. His gaze swept briefly over her shoulder before returning with a smile. "No Yariv tonight?"

Orly smiled back. She marveled at his polish—the way he *worked* a room, how diplomacy looked effortless on him. "No, Yariv's not interested. He's working on a paper."

Strictly speaking, that wasn't true. A flush crept up her neck as the lie settled. She hadn't asked Yariv if he wanted to come—not because she knew he'd refuse, but because some small, disloyal part of her hoped he'd give her the night to herself. He would have declined, of course—

he hated consular gatherings—but she hadn't risked the question. Because he *might* have said yes. And she'd wanted, if she was honest, to talk to Benny alone. The thought made her uneasy. She pressed her palms together, aware of her own discomfort. It wasn't that she wanted anything from Benny; at least that's what she told herself. She only wanted to be seen, to feel energy pass between words instead of exhausted restraint. Marriage had become a stalemate—shared history on one side, daily attrition on the other. For a single evening she wanted oxygen, the illusion of possibility rather than the shackles of temperance.

Yariv had been draining lately. They were both shattered by October 7th, but while she turned toward action, he folded inward—into analysis, resignation, despair. To Orly, survival required strength, not softness. The world was watching, waiting for Israel to falter. When terrorists sensed weakness, they pounced. Ron understood that instinctively. And Benny—Benny fought in a different arena, explaining and defending, refusing to apologize for Israel's right to exist. That clarity resonated. It wasn't attraction in the ordinary sense, she told herself—it was recognition. A man who still believed that conviction could move the world forward, who hadn't surrendered to fatigue, or given himself up to bureaucracy. When Benny spoke on television interviews and panels on CNN, his voice carried the old confidence she missed in herself—that Yariv seemed to lack. Maybe that was what she wanted to borrow for an hour: the certainty that someone still knew what was right—unambiguously. Without 'but' or 'except that.' The room around her buzzed with polite conversation, Hebrew and English, but it all sounded like static—everyone careful, cautious, vague. She was done with neutral.

"Can I get you a glass of wine?" he asked.

Still half caught in her thoughts, she nodded. He touched her elbow lightly as they

crossed the room, smiling and greeting people along the way. With their glasses filled, he led her to a narrow, dim corridor through a side door.

"Shouldn't you be out there mingling?" she asked.

"I should," he said, sipping. "But I wanted a few minutes with you."

He held out his hand. "Let me see your phone."

She hesitated, then passed it to him. He typed his number and handed it back. "Call me anytime," he said quietly. "I mean it, Orly. You look… unhappy."

"How can anyone be happy now?"

"That's not what I mean." His tone softened. "No one's happy, true—Israelis, American Jews, all of us. I meant *you.* Personally. At dinner a few weeks ago, you looked like you wanted to bite Yariv's head off."

She gave a short, nervous laugh. "Very astute. I suppose I did." The admission startled her; saying it aloud felt almost like a betrayal. She wasn't used to betraying Yariv—even in words. "He's so tolerant it borders on naïve. It's not that he agrees with Leora, but he humors her—as if her rants were reasonable. Sometimes I can't stand it."

"Yeah," Benny said, touching her shoulder lightly. His hand lingered a moment too long, warmth through the fabric. "I could sense that."

She drew in a breath. "Sometimes I feel like there's a fifth column in the apartment—not Yariv exactly, but he lets it live there."

The wine burned warmly down her throat. *Was it the wine—or something else?*

"It's nice," she said, forcing a smile, "to unburden myself. Maybe you missed your calling—you'd make a fine psychologist."

Benny's laugh filled the corridor, rich and confident, and she found herself laughing too until their glasses nearly tipped. He steadied hers, his hand briefly over hers. "Orly, I'm really glad you came tonight." His voice dropped. "Alone."

For a moment neither moved. Then he straightened, slipping easily back into his public self. "Call me anytime. Really."

Orly watched him melt into the crowd again—backslapping, shaking hands, his presence lighting up each small circle he entered. A children's choir struck up a Hanukkah song accompanied by an accordion, the brittle sweetness echoing through the hall. She stood very still, the empty glass cool in her hand, unsure whether the music comforted her—or accused her.

The children's voices rose on the last verse, a Hanukkah song from her childhood. It was a pure reminder of everything still innocent. Orly closed her eyes and for an instant she saw Ron at eight, his cheeks covered in flour as they fried potato *latkes* together; Leora spinning in circles, trying to keep tempo with her *dreidel*. She swallowed hard—the music sounded like an accusation—perhaps a warning. But some fires could not be stamped out with reason alone. She exhaled slowly, set the wine glass on a tray, and told herself she would call Benny only if something important came up. But she could already feel her fingers itching for the phone.