

## FIFTY-FOUR

**6 DECEMBER**

**CHERRY HILL**

Kelila gently pressed shut the front door to Schaffer's flat, easing it the last inch so the latch's click was no louder than that of a ball-point pen. She stood dead still and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark. Inside she felt the little buzz she always got when she was someplace she wasn't supposed to be, just like when she was a girl sneaking ice cream from the kitchen at night under threat of a thrashing if she were caught.

The thin wash of reflected night light dabbled pale blue over random highlights in the flat. The place was large by Israeli standards, neat, a bit sterile, as if the occupant stayed rather than lived here, waiting to go someplace else.

*What are you waiting for, Miriam? Or whom?*

Kelila pulled her mini-Maglite from her coat pocket, twisted it on, swept the beam across the floor as she moved past the kitchen into the little living room. Nice enough furniture—lots of blues and greens—a couple magazines on the coffee table. *The Economist* and a glossy travel magazine; interesting combination.

Two end tables flanked the sofa. On the one nearest the kitchen, Kelila found the first evidence someone actually lived there. A small pride of handcrafted cats sheltered under the table lamp: carved wood, beaded (African, Kelila had seen those before), Chinese ceramic, straw, folded tin. She played the Maglite beam over the little creatures, smiled. Had Schaffer been to all the places her cats had come from?

## Doha 12

She moved on to the bedroom. A double bed, neatly made; a nightstand on the bathroom side of the bed, holding a lamp, two books and a clock-radio; a stuffed-full mid-height bookcase on the window side. Kelila bent to peer at two gold-framed photos atop the low-rise, blond-wood dresser. One showed a nice-looking man in an American Marine dress uniform; the other featured the same man a few years older, wearing a peaked cap and a gray uniform coat with triangular yellow patches. Police?

She opened the dresser drawers one by one. Kelila wasn't surprised the underwear drawer was far more orderly than her own back home. Schaffer wore expensive lingerie. In the other drawers, obvious holes showed where shirts and sweaters ought to be.

Empty hangers spotted the otherwise full closet. Schaffer used good, sturdy plastic hangers for her blouses and slacks, not the nasty wire ones. The closet smelled of clean clothes with a faint floral overlay.

*She got away. Good for her. With Eldar?* Kelila didn't know whether she liked that idea. They'd both had a rough time and deserved a little happiness. On the other hand, Eldar's wife wasn't even a week dead.

Kelila shot the flashlight beam around the bathroom, then touched her earpiece. "They're gone."

"Are you sure?" Raffi's voice was tinged with disappointment.

If she hadn't had a good, long talk with Raffi earlier, she might've thought he was second-guessing her rather than asking, in essence, "How do you know?" "There's clothes missing, and so are her toothbrush and shampoo, and there's cat sand."

"What?"

"There's cat sand on the floor in the bathroom, but no sandbox or food bowls. You don't take your cat with you if you're just going to dinner."

"True. Any address books or anything to point to where she went?"

Lance Charnes

“Not that I’ve seen. I’ll look for a few more minutes.”

Raffi had wanted to do this search himself, to let her recover from the morning’s debacle, but she’d begged him to let her do it. She’d needed something to make her feel competent again. She was glad he’d agreed; now she had a little better idea who Miriam Schaffer was, her private face. They were roughly the same age. If they ever met, would they get along?

Kelila checked the drawers in the nightstand and the kitchen, but found nothing like an address book. She plucked the telephone handset—a white cordless model with a little LCD screen—from the cradle mounted on the kitchen wall. She pushed the “redial” button. The screen popped with a blue backlight, revealing an eleven-digit number. Kelila copied it on the palm of her blue latex glove, then removed the handset’s batteries, waited a few seconds, replaced them and thumbed “redial” again. Nothing. No one else needed to know who the covers had rung up.

After one last pass with the light, Kelila slipped from the apartment as silently as she’d come.