

The Burgas Affair

A novel by Ellis Shuman

On July 18, 2012, a *terrorist's bomb rocked a tourist bus at Burgas* Airport, killing five Israelis and their Bulgarian bus driver.

This is a fictitious account of the attack and its aftermath.

Dedicated to the victims of the Burgas bus bombing.

Prologue

When she came to, she was lying on broken pavement with a heavy weight strapped around her waist. A quick glance made her stomach drop. There was no mistaking the tiny wires, the thick strips of duct tape, the packed charges. She instantly recognized the apparatus for what it was—an explosive device likely to detonate at any moment. She gasped, realizing her life was in imminent danger.

Her vision partially cleared. Pedestrians were gathered at a distance, staring and pointing before backing off somewhat, ready to flee the scene. Traffic on the busy street came to a halt. Passengers spilled from the doors of a long, noisy tram and raced for safety. A siren sounded somewhere, growing louder by the second.

Where was she? Her mind was blank.

This can't be happening! How did she get here? Who had strapped on the explosives? She shook her head, sure she was imagining her predicament and it would all vanish like the last vestiges of an extremely gruesome nightmare. She blinked back tears but when she fully opened her eyes, she was still on the ground. A nervous policeman held back the crowd and barked into his radio.

"Help me," she groaned, lifting her arm. Then, seeing that motion shifted the bizarre contraption attached to her body, she settled back, not willing to trigger a fatal explosion. She looked down again at the protrusion of colored wires and

switches. The belt tightened. She took several deep breaths in attempts to calm her racing heart. The onlookers were shouting at her; their language was foreign. She cried out to them in desperation, in hopes they would take immediate action to prevent the impending mass-casualty event. **Didn't** they realize their lives were threatened as well?

With growing acceptance of what was at stake she knew, instinctively, there was nothing she could do. She was about to die.

1

July 18, 2012

The airplane banked to the left, tilting its wings as it began its final approach to the landing strip. Leaning across his sleeping partner, Amit glanced through the small window at the sea, at the crusty whitecaps and the sudsy waves rushing to the shore. The water was dark, full of mystery and menace. This sea deserves its name, he said to himself. The Black Sea—black as night, black as oil, black as ink. Black and infinite. But wait! There atop the waters he spotted a small boat, a dash of bobbing color. And then he saw another vessel, this one with bright sails flapping in the late-afternoon breeze. A speedboat rapidly approached the other boats only to circle round them before it was lost from view. The sea may be black, he thought, but as the plane descended, it didn't appear as menacing as he had originally observed.

A rumble below his feet indicated that the landing wheels were dropping. Amit turned to his sleeping wife and tenderly touched her bare shoulder.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” he said. “We’re about to land.”

“What? We were just taking off a minute ago.” Esty yawned, stretching her arms as much as she could in the confines of her seat.

“Well, we’re here now. And we’re going to have a great time. The time of our lives.”

He was amazed Esty had been able to nap while he hadn't been able to close his eyes for a moment during the two-hour flight from Tel Aviv. He was so excited, so eager to begin their long-awaited vacation that not even the airline magazine with its colorful descriptions of sights worth visiting could attract his attention. Was Esty excited as well? Would she be as tired on this trip as she seemed at home, or would she get a second wind to make the trip truly enjoyable? He hoped her pregnancy wouldn't hinder their weekend getaway.

Their honeymoon had been postponed many times. Soon after their marriage the previous summer they had checked out the possibility of an extended tour of Tuscany, but that plan was abandoned when they considered the expensive prices of hotels and car rental. And then, his demanding position as project manager at a high-tech company in the midst of an intense software launch took precedence over personal vacations. Meeting the deadline of preparing a marketing budget was cause for postponing a short interlude in Paris. Plans for a week on a Greek island, their ideal vacation, had fallen victim to the pressures of the launch. The repeated cancellations had caused quite a bit of friction at home. At one point, Esty came right out and declared, "It looks like we'll never go on our honeymoon." And then she added, "Or maybe we'll only go after our children have grown up and left home."

In the spring, Esty had gotten pregnant. This was something they had been anxiously anticipating, as both of them were eager to raise a family. "A boy and a girl," Amit had said when they first became engaged, convinced this was what Esty wanted as well. "At least two of each," she retorted. When she announced that her period was late, and later, that the home pregnancy test was positive, she couldn't hide the

smile from her face. “We’re on our way,” she said, proudly waving the small plastic indicator.

The baby was due in September, leaving open the question of when Esty would eventually return to her teaching position. She was ready to leave the classroom as soon as possible, so right after Amit proposed the July vacation—the realization of their honeymoon dreams—she informed the school principal. “Oh, by the way, I’m not sure about next year,” she had added, and that was that.

“Bulgaria could be fun,” Amit had told her as he scanned through the options listed on his laptop screen. “These days, Israelis are avoiding Turkey for political reasons. Everyone’s going to Bulgaria instead.” He glanced at the sofa, where she sat patting her growing belly—a sign they needed to make a decision very soon. “It’s cheap, there are plenty of beaches and good food, and it’s not too far away,” he stressed.

“I thought we were talking about Greece, about lying on the hot sands on one of the islands.”

“Islands are islands. I want to make sure this trip is really special. Bulgaria will be fun! You’ll see.”

“Are you sure this time our vacation won’t be canceled at the last minute?”

“I promise. You deserve this. We both deserve this,” he’d said, going over to the sofa to kiss her forehead. “I’m so excited about traveling abroad! We need to go now, before it’s too late for you to fly.”

The airplane’s wings leveled off, and they descended quickly. The flight had been uneventful. And short. But not too short for Esty to take a nap. He held her hand and continued to stare out the window. The plane dropped from the sky. Their postponed honeymoon was about to begin. Bulgaria was mere minutes away.

A tall, lanky man paced back and forth from one side of the Burgas terminal to the other. He glanced frequently at the electronic arrivals board and repeatedly consulted his watch. He wore plaid shorts and an Adidas T-shirt. The visor of a cheap baseball cap lay low on his forehead; a long blond ponytail emerged from its back. The man shifted the weight of his bulky backpack and headed toward the counter of a rental car company.

The plane should have landed by now, he thought. How long would it take for the passengers to disembark, to make their way through customs, claim their luggage, and head for the bus? It will all be over very soon, he told himself, fighting off the urge to simply drop his backpack and run for the nearest taxi.

He fingered the mobile phone in his pocket, awaiting the final instructions. He was instructed to leave the backpack in the baggage compartment of one of the buses, but which one? If he left the bag near where they were parked now, it would be suspicious. Someone would call security. Well, they **would if they were smart. But he couldn't take any chances.** This operation had to succeed. And for it to succeed, he needed to follow orders.

An elderly woman approached him, mumbling something unintelligible. He ignored her words and walked away. He must avoid human contact, not form any sort of impression **on anyone waiting in the hall. He couldn't allow himself** to make a mark in their memories. To them, he must remain a nonentity, someone who was never there. A smile crossed his lips with the thought of the devastating power he carried on his back.

The top line on the digital arrivals board listed the flight that attracted his attention. Arriving from Tel Aviv, it should have landed already. He checked his Rolex watch again. It was

an expensive gold extravagance he had hesitated to purchase. But when wearing the watch, he felt strong, invincible—someone to respect. He wore the gold watch. He was the man.

The plane was ten minutes late, almost fifteen.

Bulgarian gibberish blared out of the loudspeakers. He adjusted his bulky pack and headed toward the terminal's entrance doors, a vantage point from which he could observe the parking lot. Taxis waited with humming motors, the greedy drivers ready to snatch the first visitors to emerge from the building. At the far side of the lot a number of buses were parked, their motors idling softly. That was where he would go when he received word. That was where he would leave his backpack.

He wondered where the other men were. He tried to spot their small white Fiat, but the vehicle was nowhere in sight. They were probably parked around the corner. There were two of them, light-skinned Arabs who spoke English with a pronounced Arabic accent. They controlled everything, pulled all the strings. But they had paid him well, so he had no reason to question their intentions.

He paced the short length of the terminal complex. He passed the counter of the car rental agency, the small shop selling sundries and local newspapers. He reached the door to the restrooms, but despite a growing need to relieve himself, he spun around and glanced again at the glass entrance doors. A single security officer stood there, smoking. The officer seemed slightly bored, more concerned with his cigarette than with his afternoon duties. The tall stranger continued to circle the hall.

What was delaying the plane?

It would all be over soon, he told himself, once more staring at the electronic list of arriving flights. And then he could leave Bulgaria for good. His wife and child waited

patiently for him halfway across the world, without a clue as to what he would do for a rich paycheck. This was simply a job for him, extremely well-paying employment. Unlike his employers though, he was not ideologically involved in any worldwide struggle. He was merely a mule, paid to make a delivery of volatile goods. And he would soon complete his role in the operation.

He was ready for this to end. It was time to go home.

* * *

Ivan Antonov smoked his third cigarette as he waited impatiently by his bus. The flight should have landed by now. The group of passengers he was to transport to Sunny Beach would emerge from the terminal any moment. The minute they showed up he would toss the cigarette and smile at them. Smile, always smile. That was the best way to assure getting good tips when they reached the hotel.

The bus's baggage-hold doors were opened wide, making the vehicle seem much larger than it actually was. Plenty of room was available; all the baggage would fit. The group was supposed to be 42 adults and some children. None of them should have more than one suitcase; after all, it was a group arriving for only four days on the Black Sea beaches.

This was a much better gig than driving a regular route on the narrow streets of Burgas, Ivan thought to himself, pleased he had taken the initiative to work instead for the charter company. There were positive and negative aspects of his new position. On the positive side, he was able to work with tourists. Usually that meant transporting groups of rowdy Russians or noisy Ukrainians from the airport to the resort hotels, but occasionally Westerners visited as well. Ivan liked nothing more than the opportunity to practice his English, to demonstrate to his passengers that despite his appearance,

he was an educated man. Driving tourists around the city proved that he was on his way up in the world.

On the other hand, the work was seasonal. In the summer months, he could take his choice of the many available short-term assignments, but in the winter, when the cold Russian winds bore down on Burgas transforming the Black Sea into a stormy, dangerous whirlpool, tourist arrivals were few and far between. If only he could afford to work solely in the summertime, he thought. A job that would require working just six months a year. The rest of the time he would vacation at some luxurious, sunny destination.

Ivan had never taken a trip outside Bulgaria. His journey to Bucharest as a precocious six-year-old **didn't count**. He had few memories of traveling with his family to the Romanian capital, where his father had attended a pharmaceutical conference. As an adult, and certainly since marrying Anna, he had never traveled farther than Sofia. What would it be like to visit Paris or London?

Ivan sighed, realizing his aspirations to see Western Europe were just wishful thinking. He took a final puff on **his cigarette**. **Only one was left in his pack**. He **didn't have** time to search for a kiosk where he could buy more. Better to do that after he had delivered the passengers to their Sunny Beach hotel.

* * *

“There it is,” Esty said to her husband, pointing to their bright-red suitcase as it emerged from the dark tunnel onto the conveyor belt. She shifted her weight, resting one hand on her enlarged belly. She needed to sit down. And she had to pee. She was tired, despite her nap on the flight. She hoped their hotel-room bed would be comfortable, but that

really didn't matter. In her present state, she was capable of sleeping anywhere.

As Amit hurried forward to snatch their luggage before it disappeared from view, she looked for somewhere to sit. She collapsed onto the metal bench she found. From a distance, she watched him pull out the collapsible handle and wheel the suitcase around recklessly with little regard for the other passengers gathered near the baggage carousel. He raced to her side.

"Are you coming?" His smile was part enthusiastic anticipation of their vacation but also part annoyance at her struggle to get up from the bench.

Amit didn't appreciate what it meant to be pregnant, Esty thought, waddling after her husband as he made his way through the crowd. He was constantly in a hurry; he never slowed down to walk by her side. And when he did, it was always grudgingly. Couldn't he show a little more concern for what she was going through?

They both wanted this baby, she knew, but sometimes Amit had a hard time demonstrating his willingness to share the burden. She was the one who suffered; she was the one whose body had extended far beyond its normal proportions in order to make room—in a very strained, physical sense—for the future addition to their family.

Esty refused to imagine what her baby would look like, even though the doctor had informed her the newborn would be a girl. Choosing a name before the birth would be tempting *ayin ha'ra*, the evil eye. Knowing the baby's sex before the birth was not what she had wanted, but Amit had been anxious to learn this information. He was ready to paint the small bedroom in their apartment in pleasing pastel colors, to furnish it with a crib, and to stock up on baby clothes—all in shades of pink, of course. She had

reprimanded him when he returned home one evening with oversized packages of Pampers.

“After the birth,” she had told him, again and again. “There will be time for everything, after the birth.”

There was never enough time for anything. Esty followed her husband as he went through the automatic doors into the main arrivals hall of the terminal. Never enough time to relax, never enough time to sleep. Never enough time to enjoy life. She was tired.

“Hurry up, Esty,” Amit said. “We need to get to the bus.”

* * *

“Suitcase here,” Ivan said, pointing at the open doors of the luggage hold. “Poot bags here,” he said, proud to carefully enunciate the words in English, although they came across with a strong Eastern European accent. Was it not correct to pronounce “put” in the same manner as how one pronounced the name of the great Russian leader Putin? Poot. He repeated the instruction to the arriving tourists. “Poot bags here.”

This would be a demanding group, Ivan thought, as he saw them approach. Israelis. Young couples, some of them teenagers. An older couple, the wife having slight difficulties walking. A pregnant woman trailing behind her husband.

“Poot bags here,” he repeated.

The passengers started boarding the bus. The pregnant woman was first in line. She placed one hand carefully on the rail.

“Can we sit anywhere?” she asked.

Before Ivan had a chance to state his reply, the woman’s husband came up behind her and answered her question. But the answer came in another language, probably Hebrew. Ivan could only smile. He shook his head sideways, but his mouth was wide with a welcoming smile.

“We shouldn’t get on?” the pregnant woman asked.

“Yes, board bus,” Ivan said, again shaking his head from side to side. “Please, to sit on bus.”

The woman glanced at her husband. “Amit?” When he nodded his head, she labored up the steps into the bus.

“Poot bags here,” Ivan said to the next passengers.

One man, tall and thin, wearing plaid shorts and an Adidas T-shirt, his face half hidden under the protruding visor of his baseball cap, tried to push past Ivan with a huge backpack.

“No, you must to poot bags here,” Ivan said, indicating the luggage hold.

The man didn’t reply. Instead, he hurried up the steps, stood at the top, and stared at the passengers already seated inside. His baggage bulged behind him, a huge protrusion that resembled a camel’s hump.

Ivan shrugged. Some Israelis can be so rude, he thought. No matter. He was just glad the passengers were getting on his bus. Soon they would all be on board and he could drive them to the resort hotel. After that, an ice-cold Kamenitza beer would be the fitting conclusion to a long day.

* * *

The final communiqué had been three words. “Board the bus.”

The tall, thin man wondered why he was instructed to board the bus. He had been told to keep as low a profile as possible. Surely the driver, and the other passengers, would notice he was not part of their group. After all, they were Israelis and they had flown together from Tel Aviv. With his fair skin, he didn’t look like the rest of them. They wouldn’t let him get on.

But his orders were clear and he wasn’t in a position to question them. He pushed past the local driver and climbed

into the bus's interior, eager to drop the backpack onto one of the seats and quickly get off. Then he would simply disappear. He would walk away, without looking back or attracting attention. By the time the bus departed from the lot, his brief appearance among the passengers would have been forgotten. By then, he would have already teamed up with his associates, out of sight. As the bus drove away from the parking lot, away from the Burgas airport, the Arabs would activate the remote-controlled device. It was doubtful they would even hear the blast.

"Excuse me," he said to the pregnant woman who obstructed the aisle. She looked at him strangely, recognizing immediately that he didn't belong. And, she was expecting to be addressed in Hebrew! That was not a language he knew and he had never expected to be talking to the Israeli passengers on the bus. "Excuse me," he repeated, hoping the forced smile on his face would be sufficient.

Finally, she moved aside, allowing him to head farther toward the back. His path was blocked again, this time by the man who appeared to be the pregnant woman's husband.

The husband barked some words at him. He tried to ignore the angry Israeli. The man shoved him and he backed away from the unexpected assault. It was hard to maneuver with the bulky knapsack on his back.

"Don't you understand?" the husband shouted in English. "Why did you push my wife? Can't you see she's pregnant? Why are you on this bus? Are you part of our group?"

He didn't answer. Instead he eased the backpack from his shoulders and dropped it on an empty seat. It was good to put down the heavy weight. He felt the sweat on his back; his forehead was damp as well. This altercation was not part of the plan.

"Sorry," he said, hoping the irate husband would back away.

A dull ringing noise made him look at his backpack. The noise was coming from the mobile phone planted inside. The second mobile phone. The one given to him by the two Arabs. The phone that controlled the bomb! Calling its number would activate the detonator!

Before he had a chance to react, a wave of intense heat and destruction blasted through the bus. Along with the husband, his pregnant wife, the local bus driver, and some of the other passengers, he was instantly incinerated, never having a chance to comprehend the simple fact that the other men had betrayed him.

2

“Where were you when the bomb went off?”

“Did you see anything?”

“Was the man who detonated the bomb on the bus?”

“Stop!” the young Israeli woman cried, raising her hand to fend off the verbal assault of the plainclothes officer confronting her in the stuffy room. “Who are you again?” She gazed at the tall officer with teary eyes, and at the uniformed policeman leading against the wall with his arms crossed. Her confusion and disorientation were quite apparent.

“I am Detective Stanchev, Detective Boyko Stanchev.” He was trying to be patient. He understood how difficult this must be for her, but time was of an essence. The circumstances called for quick action. Boyko frowned at the other cop and continued to address the woman. “Can you please answer my questions?”

“I need to go to the hospital. Can’t you see that I’m bleeding?”

“It is not serious,” Boyko said, glancing at the small wound on the woman’s arm. “Do you understand me? Perhaps my English is not good enough?”

“Your English is just fine,” she cried, making a halfhearted effort to wipe the tears from her face. “It’s all such a shock. I need to get back to my friends, to make sure they’re all right.”

“Your friends are okay,” he assured her. He leaned forward and put his hand gently on her shoulder. “Our questions are

very important, very urgent. You must understand. There was an explosion on your bus. We need to find out what happened.”

“Why you are questioning me? Why won’t you let me see a medic? Why won’t you give me aspirin?” She clutched the bloodied towel tighter against her injured arm.

“We must question everyone on the flight from Tel Aviv. Someone must have seen something. This is a crime, a terrible crime.”

“Just a crime? Is that what you think? This was an act of terror. A suicide bombing!”

“A suicide bombing? Ah, so you did see the man who detonated the bomb? What did he look like?”

“No, no,” she pleaded. “I didn’t see the man. I didn’t see anything. Please, let me be.” She started to sob again. Then she said, “I demand to speak to someone from my embassy. Bring me the Israeli ambassador and I will answer your questions. This is my right.”

“We need you to answer our questions,” Boyko repeated.

“I need to go to the hospital! I need to talk to my ambassador!” she said, lowering her head to the table.

* * *

“It is useless.” It was the first time the shorter officer had spoken up since they began interrogating the Israeli woman. As the two left the small travel agency office converted into an impromptu interrogation room, he spoke to Boyko in Bulgarian. “She will not tell us anything,” he said.

“She is still in shock,” Boyko replied, reaching into his pocket for a cigarette. He thought again about what the Israeli woman had said. This was an act of terror! No, how could that be? A serious crime, yes, but not an act of terror. He withdrew his hand without the smoke he craved and

straightened his shoulders. As the policeman he had partnered with walked off, he turned his attention to the chaos around him.

The cavernous hall was noisy with the anguished cries of passengers who had survived the blast. The most seriously injured had already been evacuated after initial triage, taken away by ambulances that had arrived at an exasperating slow pace. Others, with bleeding limbs, broken bones, and lacerated faces, were being comforted by relatives and loved ones. All flights in and out of Burgas had been canceled; arriving planes were being diverted to Varna up the coast. Outside, the parking lot was cordoned off. Thick smoke billowed from the smoldering remnants of the tour bus. The number of corpses within the wreckage was unclear.

“Boyko Stanchev, I didn’t think we would meet again so soon.”

Boyko spun around; his features clouded when he recognized the man addressing him. This was not the time or place to rehash old grudges, yet he couldn’t help but issue a snide remark.

“Kamen Petrov, you’re the last policeman who should be called upon to investigate a bus bombing. Why aren’t you directing traffic on Ulitza Aleksandrovska?”

“Very funny,” Kamen replied, brushing lint off a suit jacket too small for his stocky frame. “Did you get anything from that one?” he asked, nodding his head toward the young Israeli woman whom Boyko had just questioned. She was sobbing, barely standing on her feet as a worried boyfriend embraced her at the back of the hall.

“I do not need to tell you what I learned,” Boyko said, forcing himself to remain calm, to momentarily put aside his animosity for this officer on the local police force. But then, realizing what set them apart, he stood back. “I owe you nothing,” he said.

“So, why did they call you in?” Kamen taunted him, not hiding his contempt for Boyko. “You’re not really a detective anymore. You should be in Sofia, sitting at your plush desk dealing with diplomats and their multiple parking violations. Are you so high and mighty these days that you’ve forgotten how to question witnesses?”

There had been a time, just a few years previous, when such a remark would have led Boyko to lash out at Kamen, to strike him so hard that the heavysset officer would suffer the consequences for days. He was filled with loathing for the man. Luckily, they no longer worked together, as Boyko no longer reported to the Burgas police. His career had brought him to a more sophisticated position based in Sofia. The superiority he felt over his former colleague eased his temper.

Boyko clenched his jaw and took a deep breath. “No one remembers anything helpful,” he said in a neutral voice as he focused on the complexities of the investigation.

Kamen was about to add something, backtracking from his confrontational tone, but their conversation was cut short by the arrival of an older man with thick gray hair and a wide mustache of the same distinguishing color.

“Comrades!”

This was how Commander Ivan Zhekov of the Burgas District Police Directorate regularly addressed his men, Boyko recalled, thinking the salutation had probably been more effective during the country’s Communist days. He shook hands with the commander and shifted to the side, effectively pushing Kamen back against the tiles of the terminal wall.

“Kamen, go join your partner and question those two Israelis over there. I want to talk to Boyko alone for a moment,” Zhekov said with an air of authority.

Kamen scowled but didn't say a word and hurried off, his hand glued to his ear as he received a radioed update from other policemen.

"I need a cigarette," Boyko said.

"Let's go outside."

Boyko followed Zhekov through the automatic glass doors to the driveway. They stood silent for a moment, staring across the lot as firemen sprayed water at the thick smoke billowing to the sky from a metal frame that previously constituted a bus.

Boyko cupped his hands and lit up a cigarette. He offered the pack to Zhekov, but the commander dismissed the offer.

"When did you get here?" Boyko asked.

"I should be asking you that!" Zhekov replied. "Or, better yet, how did you know to come?"

"I was listening to the police radio transmissions."

"Those frequencies are encrypted," Zhekov said, but then he dropped the subject. "The situation was chaos, simply chaos," he told Boyko. "I arrived as quickly as I could. The policemen present were confused, disoriented. Some of the officers were racing toward the burning bus; others were running away. The fire trucks were late in coming. Cars were freely driving in and out of the parking lot and curious bystanders were everywhere, obstructing security operations."

Boyko was surprised to hear these words. Zhekov was probably letting off steam. After all, the commander was dealing with an unfamiliar situation, one that was far beyond his experience and expertise. Nothing this serious had ever happened in the Burgas district. There had never been such a bombing in all of Bulgaria.

"I am a bit surprised to learn that you have been assigned to the investigation," Zhekov said.

“Well, by chance I happened to be in Burgas, busy with other obligations. None of your concern. But, now that I am here, I am glad to be on board.”

A buzz interrupted their conversation. Zhekov adjusted his earpiece to better hear an update from his team. The commander barked some orders in return, directing security personnel to new positions in the parking lot and inside the busy terminal hall. “Get the injured passengers evacuated as quickly as possible,” he shouted. “Shut down the airport and make sure all access roads have been blockaded. We need total lockdown!”

Boyko was about to say something but then the commander issued one additional order.

“Keep the press away!” Turning to Boyko, he complained, “The media think they have free passage everywhere. Cameramen, overeager reporters. They showed up in force and are interfering in everything we do.”

As Zhekov answered the radio again to consult with another of his subordinates, Boyko wondered what his role would be in the investigation. With Zhekov in command, he would need to comply with the senior officer’s authority. It would be just like the old days, Boyko realized, when he took his orders from the commander.

Unless he felt it better to ignore those orders.

“Boyko, we must make progress in this investigation, and we need to do it immediately.”

“Of course,” Boyko started to reply, but something deeper was implied in Zhekov’s statement. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“These are Israelis,” Zhekov said, waving his hand in the general direction of the terminal. “Do you not see? This will be an international incident. Israelis—killed and injured on Bulgarian soil. This is bad, very bad.”

“Of course, it’s bad.”

“The Israelis are on their way now, to help with the investigation. Boyko, this one will not simply go away quietly. It’s already all over the news, and it will be in the news for a long time. Until we find out who did this.”

Boyko stared at the commander, trying hard to comprehend exactly what Zhekov was telling him. Zhekov is getting older, he thought, as he considered the commander’s wrinkled face and growing paunch. What had he heard about the man? Rumors circulating in Sofia suggested that Zhekov was waiting for the right political position to open up and then he would hang up his uniform without a single regret. Zhekov was a likeable enough officer. The two of them went way back to Boyko’s initial days on the Burgas force. Those days, when Boyko served under Zhekov’s command, were long gone. Now, a bombing at Burgas Airport found them working together again.

“It is possible, no actually quite likely that the Israelis were the intended victims,” Boyko suggested, puffing on his cigarette.

“I am not sure what we have here,” Zhekov admitted. “We assume the bomber, whoever he was, targeted the arriving passengers. Why else would he place the bomb on that particular bus? The only other possibility is that he was targeting the driver. We cannot be sure if the bomber knew Israelis were aboard. The Israelis, though, will think otherwise. They will surely believe this incident was directed at them. They already label it an act of terrorism. Ha! No terrorist organization has claimed responsibility for the bombing and yet the Israelis assume it was a terror attack. And now they are on their way here.”

Boyko stared into Zhekov’s eyes as if important clues were hidden behind the senior officer’s gray irises. “The Israelis are coming, and they will demand answers,” he said.

“You’re catching up fast, Boyko. They will ask many questions. Did the bomber know that this particular bus would transport Israeli tourists? Was the bomb on the bus or under the bus? Is the bomber dead or alive? Was the bomb detonated by remote control? Did the bomber have accomplices, or did he act alone? And more important than any other question—who sent the bomber?”

“The passengers we have questioned—they do not have answers. They hardly remember anything,” Boyko said.

“We must question everyone. Witnesses inside the terminal and drivers in the parking lot. Someone will remember something. We need to get the answers on our own, without Israeli intervention. It is in our interest to solve this case as quickly as possible. Do you understand this, Boyko?”

“I understand. Should I get back inside and carry on?” Boyko asked, dropping his half-smoked cigarette to the ground and crushing it with his shoe.

“We need the answers before the Israeli team arrives. We do not want them fiddling around in our business.”

“I understand,” Boyko repeated.

“There’s one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Boyko, we may have had our differences in the past, before you transferred to Sofia, but as long as you are here, stationed in Burgas, you are under my command.”

Boyko started to protest, but Zhekov waved him down. “I don’t care if you are here on behalf of SANS or if you report to the UN, for that matter. In Burgas, on this investigation, you report to me.”

Boyko watched the commander walk away and then he re-entered the terminal. The mass confusion seemed greater, the wailing of the injured louder than before. Police officers were talking to the passengers, taking notes and recording

evidence, but Kamen was nowhere in sight. A woman wearing the uniform of a rental car agency distributed bottled water while someone else helped Israelis connect their mobile phones to local service providers so they could make international calls. Another ambulance pulled up at the entrance and paramedics rushed inside, not initially knowing who to evacuate next.

“The Israelis are coming,” Boyko said to himself, fearing that this fact would create new problems rather than quickly resolve the case of the airport bombing.

3

“I didn’t see anything. I was still inside the terminal. But I heard the blast. It was so loud I thought the entire building would collapse.”

Boyko nodded at the woman sitting across the table from him. He was trying to empathize with her as she dealt with the horror she had experienced; truly he was. He addressed the woman’s nervous husband.

“You, sir? Did you see anything? Anyone suspicious?”

“I was outside,” he replied, eyeing the office’s lone door. “I hurried ahead to put our suitcases on the bus, to get good seats.”

Boyko feared the Israeli would bolt from the room at any moment. He leaned forward and urged the man to continue.

“There was this man. He was different.”

“Different? In what way?”

“Like he didn’t belong. He didn’t look like one of us.”

“Can you describe him?”

“He was tall, quite thin and very light-skinned. He had something on his head, a cap of some kind. And he wore shorts. He looked like a tourist.”

“Was he Israeli?” Boyko prompted.

“No. I’m not sure. I don’t know.”

“Ask them about Amit and Esty,” the woman said, prodding her husband.

“Amit and Esty?” Boyko asked.

“Yes, an Israeli couple with us on the flight. I think both of them were already on the bus,” the man said.

“Are they okay?” his wife interjected. “She’s pregnant and tires quickly. I haven’t seen them in the airport.”

The door of the office opened and Zhekov entered, accompanied by two strangers. They were here in an official capacity, Boyko assumed, and they appeared to be foreigners. The married couple looked up. Relief was apparent in their eyes, even though it was unlikely they had ever seen these newcomers before.

“We’ll take over from here,” the man at Zhekov’s side announced.

“*Atem b’seder?*” the young woman with him asked the couple.

Boyko recognized the tone of the words, the accent. Hebrew! How had the Israelis arrived so quickly? he wondered. Oh great. This was going to screw up everything. He moved to the side of the room and stood next to the uniformed policeman.

“Wait a minute,” Zhekov said, clearing his throat. “From this point forth, we are working a joint investigation. If you wish to question the passengers, fine, but members of my team will be present as well. And all questions must be in English.”

“I’ll translate their answers into English,” the woman standing in the doorway promised, her voice surprisingly confident.

Ah, a translator! Boyko thought. The man at her side must be the lead Israeli investigator. As the woman spoke quietly with her distressed compatriots, Boyko whispered to Zhekov in Bulgarian.

“They send a woman to translate. I hope she is capable of translating my questions.”

“Hardly a translator,” Zhekov replied. “She will be the one asking the questions.”

“What?”

“We will play this by the rules,” Zhekov said. “But, report everything you learn to me. We cannot let our friends from Tel Aviv call all the shots.”

Zhekov left the room with the uniformed policeman and the Israeli man. Boyko leaned back against the wall as he listened to the couple speak to the woman in Hebrew, the language very guttural and quick. He longed for another cigarette but didn’t dare step out of the office. This was his investigation, and yet, this woman was taking over. She was dressed in jeans and a beige blouse, looking more like a tourist than someone assigned to take part in such a serious investigation. She was barely out of university, he figured. What did she know about police work? Surely she would miss something vital in her questions. The fact that Zhekov had sanctioned the woman’s presence prevented him from interrupting, from asserting his control over the interrogation. It wasn’t right!

The questioning went on for several minutes. The Israeli woman asking the questions frequently touched the wife’s shoulder and nodded sympathetically as the husband spoke his piece. And then, without notice, the couple stood up and walked out.

“You let them go?” Boyko asked incredulously.

“I heard their story. They have nothing more to add to what we already know,” the woman said, taking one of the seats at the table and staring at Boyko.

“What we already know? What do we already know?”

“This was a suicide bombing, perpetrated by Hezbollah against Israeli citizens on Bulgarian soil,” the woman stated without hesitation.

“How have you concluded this? Hezbollah?”

“All the evidence so far supports this. Or rather, the lack of evidence suggesting otherwise. There is nothing else possible.”

Boyko shook his head. How could this be? The Israeli investigators had only just arrived on a flight from Tel Aviv. After a five-minute talk with an Israeli couple—a couple waiting for their bags in the airport terminal at the time of the bus bombing—she had already reached a perfunctory conclusion that it was the work of Hezbollah. Boyko racked his brain, trying to recall what he knew of Hezbollah. Weren't they some social organization based in Lebanon? Oh, right. Israel had a serious beef with them. There had been a war—rockets fired into Israel. That was a while ago. How could one infer from past rocket launches that Hezbollah had perpetrated this bombing?

“We have yet to question all the eyewitnesses,” Boyko said, trying to justify the actions of his compatriots. “The most seriously injured, and those who were on the bus at the time—we took them to the hospital, but we must still talk with them.”

“What about the passengers in the hall?”

“We are questioning them one by one, as you can see.”

“Didn't you see that some are injured and in need of immediate medical attention?”

“We thought it best to keep them here, at the scene of the crime, until we talked to everyone.”

“You should have first worried about their health,” the woman said, standing up and heading for the door. “Well, it doesn't matter now. We're taking them.”

“This is our investigation!” Boyko protested.

“No, this is a joint investigation, as your fellow officer stated. We are concerned about our citizens' well-being. We'll fly them back to Israel shortly.”

Boyko coughed. The woman surprised him by extending her hand. It was an indication she was willing to put aside the initial harshness between them in the name of their need to work together.

“Oh, by the way, my name is Ayala. Ayala Navon.”

“Boyko,” he replied. “Boyko Stanchev of the State Agency for National Security.”

“Well, Boyko Stanchev. Let’s go.”

4

Several hours had passed since the Israeli team landed in Burgas and now they were seated across from their Bulgarian counterparts in the conference room of the regional police station on Georgi Kirkov Street. Styrofoam cups of lukewarm coffee were placed next to plates of dry biscuits, but the refreshments were left untouched. The atmosphere was tense; pressure for a quick closure of the case was tangible.

Commander Zhekov glanced at the room's noisy air conditioner on the far wall, waited a moment for it to kick into a new cooling cycle, and then called the briefing to order with a few words of introduction. "We're all on a first-name basis here," he said, addressing everyone in the room. "If that's okay with you."

The Israelis nodded their agreement.

"Okay, let's begin. What's the situation at the airport?" he asked, turning to Kamen, who was seated at the far end of the table.

As Kamen prepared to give his report, Boyko felt his revulsion for the man about to boil over. He wondered how his incompetent former colleague had managed to stay on the force, how he could even be called upon to give a report in such an important briefing. Kamen had such an exaggerated sense of his own importance, yet he was the first officer asked to address the meeting. Boyko glared at the man as he began to speak.

“The Israeli passengers have all been questioned,” Kamen said. “We have interviewed Bulgarians who were passing through the terminal at the time of the bombing and airport staff as well. As an added precaution, due to the situation, security has been beefed up at both the Israeli Embassy and the central synagogue in Sofia. I think we’re moving forward quickly,” he said, summing up his initial report.

Quickly? With Kamen working the investigation that was hardly likely, Boyko thought, as he fidgeted in his seat next to Zhekov. The commander was studying his notes, not paying full attention to Kamen’s report. Sitting on Zhekov’s other side was the officer in charge of the local bomb squad, who reported that his team was working to determine what explosives were used in the bombing. Next to him sat Milen, a veteran detective Boyko knew from the Burgas station. Milen leaned forward in his seat, eager to present his findings to the gathering.

Boyko glanced again at Kamen, who sneered at Boyko in return. Kamen and the others were no longer his colleagues—that was all in the past. Boyko ignored Kamen’s dirty look and regarded the visitors from overseas.

Two of the Israelis were athletic men with serious features and crew-cut hair. Despite being casually dressed in jeans and short-sleeved shirts, their attitude was tough. Boyko wondered if they were IDF commandos. Seated between them was the Israeli woman, the one who had questioned the couple with him at the terminal. What was her name? Something strange. She was so young, Boyko thought, too inexperienced to be involved in any of this. With her Mediterranean complexion, thick black shoulder-length hair, and dark eyes, he couldn’t help but stare. There were no rings on her fingers, leading him to the assumption that she was not married. She wore no jewelry at all; she didn’t appear to use makeup either. She certainly didn’t need any accessories

to heighten her appeal. She was rather attractive, in a natural sort of way. Despite her assertive handling of the interrogation in the interview room, Boyko hardly thought her suitable to be part of a bombing investigation.

“We arrived in Burgas a few hours after the terror attack,” an Israeli who introduced himself as Boaz said. “Medics from Magen David Adom, our version of the Red Cross, quickly assumed responsibility for the injured passengers. We dispatched one of our senior doctors to Burgas Hospital where, I understand, the most seriously injured are being treated. The bodies of those killed in the bombing are still at the airport, awaiting identification. After that is completed, we will transport them back to Israel. The injured will also be flown home to continue their medical treatment.”

“We retrieved six bodies from the bus,” Milen began, his voice grave and respectful of the dead. “And one person was killed on the steps of the bus. As Boaz stated, we have not yet identified the victims, but we are hoping to complete this task very soon. Those men, the ones dressed entirely in black, are currently dealing with the remains.”

“ZAKA,” the Israeli woman explained. “It’s short for Zihui Korbanot Ason, or in English, Disaster Victim Identification. In Jewish law, all body parts and blood must be gathered and buried according to our traditions. The ZAKA team flew in with us from Tel Aviv.”

She was cut short by one of the crew-cut men at her side who directed his question at Milen. “Do we know which of the passengers from the flight are missing? This will help us determine who was killed in the attack.”

“We have a list of everyone on the flight from Tel Aviv,” Milen continued, holding up the passenger manifest. “The most seriously injured were evacuated to the hospital by ambulance, as your colleague stated.”

“Surely you have a list of everyone taken to the hospital?” the Israeli woman asked.

“We have a list, yes,” Milen replied, riffling through the papers in front of him. “It’s here somewhere. What we must do is compile all our notes into a master list so that we can finalize who, exactly, is missing.”

“You haven’t done that yet?” one of the Israelis asked. Boyko didn’t know his name but it was apparent that this man was impatient and expected instant results. Zhekov was right about the Israelis. They all expected instant results.

“We will do it right away,” Zhekov assured everyone in the room. “Milen, please continue.”

“Okay. There are several theories as to how the bombing was perpetrated.”

“Several theories? What are you talking about?” one of the Israelis asked, his voice rising.

“Please, we are reporting the facts as we now know them,” Zhekov said, signaling Milen to continue.

“We do not yet know if the bombing was due to an explosion on the bus itself, or if something detonated inside the luggage hold,” Milen said, a bit nervously. “It could be that the perpetrator was a suicide bomber. We admit the possibility exists. There are similarities to bombings of this nature that occurred in Tel Aviv.”

“We do not know if the bomber was killed in the attack or if the bombing was carried out by remote control,” Kamen added.

“Do you have the remains of the bomber?” the Israeli woman asked.

“There is not much we do know as fact at this early stage,” Zhekov summed up. “That is why we must work together to uncover the facts. We are running a joint operation and we will share all information received.”

“Who do these guys think they are?” Boyko whispered to the commander in Bulgarian. “This is a crime committed on Bulgarian soil and therefore it should be investigated by us. If anything, this will be a joint police-SANS operation. I do not care who the victims were.”

“Boyko, I am following orders from above, orders from the highest level. I don’t need to explain to you what that means. The bombing was an attack on Israeli citizens, and due to our country’s high level of friendship and cooperation with Israel, we will work in close collaboration with Tel Aviv.”

Zhekov has clearly changed his tune! Boyko thought. We need to get the answers on our own, without Israeli intervention—those were the commander’s exact words when the two of them had spoken at the terminal. And then, surprisingly, he had forced Boyko to sit back as the Israeli woman questioned her compatriots in Hebrew. These so-called orders from above had apparently changed everything. And Zhekov was quick to go along!

The commander apologized to the Israelis across the table for speaking in Bulgarian. “My team is eager to work with you and will cooperate in every way possible. Boyko, here, represents SANS, the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security. I know SANS headquarters in Sofia is in direct contact with your colleagues in Tel Aviv and much work is being done behind the scenes as we speak. I assure you, we will get to the bottom of this terrible crime in no time at all,” Zhekov concluded.

“It’s an open and shut case,” the Israeli woman said. “The mode of operation corresponds to how Hezbollah operates overseas.”

“Hezbollah!” Boyko said, unable to help himself. “Again I hear that name. Did Hezbollah confirm they are behind the bombing? We have no proof whatsoever that this Hezbollah

was responsible for the attack, as terrible as it may have been.”

“I agree with my colleague,” Milen added. “If we’re dealing with terrorism, and we have not yet concluded this is the case, the perpetrators could be from that other Palestinian group. Hamas. Or possibly Al-Qaeda.”

“Hamas doesn’t instigate terrorist attacks overseas,” Boaz pointed out. “Their terror strikes are only in Israel itself. As for Hezbollah, they have a notorious track record of murderous attacks. Buenos Aires, 1992. Buenos Aires again in 1994. London, 1994. And of course, the many attacks on Americans in Beirut, including the 1983 bombing that killed more than 200 U.S. Marines.”

“But never Bulgaria,” Milen argued.

“Not until now,” Boaz admitted.

“Nothing is being ruled out at this stage,” Zhekov assured the Israelis. “It’s been a long day and we must plan how to proceed. We will divide into teams, Bulgarians and Israelis working together. It goes without saying that we are more familiar with the territory but we will most certainly benefit from Israel’s experience in investigating crimes of this nature.”

Zhekov consulted his notes before continuing. “Milen, you’ll team up with Boaz. The two of you will follow up on the questioning of everyone who may have witnessed the bomber arriving at the bus. While we have initial reports as to what the bomber looked like, I am sure we’ll uncover more information very soon. We have not yet located the bus driver, as he would be our prime witness. I fear he may be one of the injured, or possibly among the dead.”

Zhekov again checked his notes. “Kamen, you will work with Moshe reviewing CCTV footage. Review everything—security camera footage from the terminal building, from the parking lot, from every business in the vicinity of the airport.”

Moshe whispered something to Boaz, the Israeli who appeared to be the one in charge of the delegation. The others seemed to quiet down whenever Boaz spoke. This Boaz was smart, Boyko thought, but he's a bit overconfident, thinking he has all the answers. Yet, perhaps he could keep the rest of them in line.

"Also, please check regarding any and all reports of stolen vehicles and robberies in the area," Zhekov continued. "If someone reports their cat's gone missing, we need to check that as well.

"Next, our local bomb squad, commanded by Anton, will work with Eyal, who I understand is an IDF demolitions expert."

"Actually, I'm a forensic examiner who specializes in identifying explosives," Eyal explained.

"Good," Zhekov said, again consulting his notes. "We need to know what explosives were used, where they were procured."

"Was the bomb made in Bulgaria?" one of the Israelis asked.

"Exactly," the commander replied. "We need to know these things."

"What about me?" Boyko asked, growing impatient with the pace at which Zhekov was conducting the meeting. He frowned when he saw Kamen smirking at the far end of the table.

"Boyko, you will work with Ayala," the commander said.

This caused Boyko to nearly jump from his chair. "Izveneti?"

"We speak only English here," Zhekov said. "Sit down and listen carefully to your assignment. The two of you will try to determine who helped the bomber plan, and prepare for the attack on the bus. I think we're all in agreement that he

must have had accomplices, even if we have not yet established that we're talking about terrorists."

"There could be a local infrastructure which helped him with reconnaissance, and with preparing the bomb," one of the Israelis suggested.

"Local infrastructure?" Boyko said. "Here in Bulgaria? Ha!"

"That's what you will investigate," Zhekov replied calmly, unperturbed by Boyko's interruption. "Your mission, working with Ayala, is to see if there were Bulgarians who assisted the bomber in the days before the attack. This information is vital to our investigation."

Watching the Israelis whispering among themselves, Boyko was livid, not only because Zhekov had reprimanded him so openly, but also because the commander had assigned him to partner with a woman.

Again, he scrutinized the female interloper in the room. She carried such a know-it-all attitude. It would be hell working with her. They would quarrel, disagree where to go, argue whom to question. Working this case with a woman tagging along would prove to be a nightmare. Wait a minute! This was Bulgaria, his home turf. He was the host here; he knew the country. He would set the pace, make the tactical decisions how to proceed. He wouldn't allow a visitor from overseas to give him orders, and it didn't matter if the guest was male or female. And as far as her being young, it only made him more confident that he would be the one in charge. After all, he was more experienced in these matters. Putting a woman in her place shouldn't be too difficult!

A smile started to form on his face. It would be interesting working with such a beautiful sidekick. With her dark skin, he wondered if she was an Arab. No, how could that be? Did Israel's security services employ Arabs, and if they did, would they be sent overseas to investigate a bombing in Bulgaria? She was suntanned, perhaps from spending long afternoons

at the beaches in Tel Aviv. An image formed in Boyko's mind of the appealing woman in a bikini. He envisioned her perfect skin, her long legs.

"Boyko?"

"What?" Then, embarrassed for the thoughts that had crossed his mind, Boyko coughed. He sat forward to better concentrate on the commander's summary of the plan of action.

"There's a lot of work ahead of us," Zhekov said, "and much responsibility. Tel Aviv is working on this case full time, and our colleagues in Sofia are busy gathering intelligence as well. The media is hounding us for a quick resolution, and the eyes of the world are watching. But you, my friends, Bulgarians and Israelis working together, are on the ground at the scene of the crime. You are the team that will investigate, interview witnesses, and consider all possibilities until we resolve who was responsible for this horrendous attack. I wish you luck. I wish all of us luck. Now, let's go and solve this crime."

The abrupt manner in which Zhekov brought the meeting to an end was typical, so similar to how he concluded the many briefings Boyko had attended during his years on the Burgas police force. Yet now, the commander's statements sounded like the pointless slogans of a political campaign. Zhekov's words served no purpose other than to inflate his already overblown ego.

Boyko stood up and saw the Israeli woman staring at him from across the table. He blushed slightly, trying to dismiss the imagined images of her scantily clad body from his mind. He shook hands with his former colleagues, pointedly avoiding Kamen. Much work lay ahead. He hoped that both he and the task force were ready for the challenge.

5

The midnight hour had long passed by the time Boyko showed up at his unkempt one-room apartment on the second floor of an aging tenement building not far from the city center. The apartment he still kept despite his transfer to a new job in Sofia. The apartment that he had purchased long ago in the wake of his failed marriage. He flicked the switch; the naked bulb in the ceiling grudgingly offered some light on the situation, and the situation was not good. Dirty clothes were everywhere—on the unmade bed, on the floor near the bathroom, on the chair next to the small kitchen table where he ate his meals. The tabletop itself was hidden under a pile of newspapers and old papers; the sink was filled with unwashed dishes from the morning, and from the day before. Hardly a home to be proud of.

Boyko ignored the mess and headed to the noisy refrigerator. He opened the door and stepped back when confronted with a foul odor emanating from within. No, he wasn't that hungry after all. What he needed was a drink.

He searched in the cupboards above the sink, but all he came across were empty bottles. Hadn't he saved some premium whiskey especially for a night like this? No, that was gone. All gone.

A lone bottle of rakia rested on the counter. Faithful rakia, the Bulgarian national drink. When no imported whisky was available to wash away his sorrows, there was always rakia.

He poured himself a shot of the high-proof alcohol and downed it in one gulp. Then he poured another. Now what he needed was a cigarette.

Tossing dirty underwear to the floor, Boyko sat down hard and rested his elbows on yesterday's news. And he wondered what he was getting into.

Why did this have to happen here, in Burgas of all places? Why couldn't the bombing have taken place in some other country, like Romania for example? Terrorist attack—that's what the Israelis were calling it. Terror, of all things, and on his native soil! The seriousness of the case threatened to overwhelm him. He took another drink.

Dealing with bombs on buses was not in the job description when he joined SANS. He had assumed the state agency would provide him with a comfy office, a secretary. That his most serious concern would be how often to liaison with diplomats. How to deal with their parking tickets. How to assist the security teams when dignitaries arrived in Bulgaria. Never had he considered the possibility that he would be required to combat "intelligence gathering on behalf of alien forces," as defined in the SANS charter. That he would need to

fight the “endangerment of the sovereignty.” That it would be his duty to safeguard the “territorial integrity of the State and the unity of the Nation.”

No, that was not at all what he had expected. He had expected an easy life. Yet upon taking the position in Sofia, he had not consulted with foreign diplomats even once! And much to his dismay, he didn't have an attractive assistant to deliver coffee and croissants at his beck and call. Instead, a few months after assuming his new position he had been relocated to the agency's Burgas office, back to familiar territory he had escaped in hopes of furthering his career. And here he was being forced to interact again with his former colleagues. He knew he faced many sleepless nights in his lousy one-room flat.

He downed another glass of the stiff rakia.

You are always at work.

His ex-wife was talking to him again, messing with his mind. Somehow, she always managed to enter his head when he was feeling sorry for himself. Perhaps she came along the moment rakia was poured and the potent drink filtered through his system. He wanted to smack her, to chase away the bad memories of their unhappy life together. But he couldn't see her. She wasn't here at all, yet she was taunting him with her sassy sarcasm.

You do not see what is important in life. You are a loser, Boyko Stanchev, and that's because you don't value what is near and dear to you.

“Stay away from me!” Boyko shouted out loud, causing a moth to waver in its orbit around the room's lone light. “Stay away from me, now!” he repeated.

He could see her face. Memories twisted her features, making them ugly and distorted. At one time, he had found her so attractive that he couldn't think of anyone else. So attractive that he became jealous whenever he imagined other men looking at her.

Her name was Galina, and like Boyko, she had come from a small village in the center of the country to study at a university in Sofia. While he had majored in criminology, she was a biology student. They met at a dance in Studentski Grad, the student campus in the north of the city. He was attracted to her slim, petite figure; to her rich red hair; and to her upturned nose and blue eyes. Her skin was sparkling white, as if she never ventured into the Balkan sunlight. She seemed to enjoy sex as much as he did. Soon, they were an item, and shortly after, they were living together. A small wedding, attended only by family members, came a bit later.

At least we never had children, Boyko said to himself, wallowing in his alcohol-induced recollections of the woman. Their love quickly faded and their marriage went on the rocks. She didn't appreciate anything he did. His assignments on the Burgas police force only served to increase her bitterness. While he devoted long hours to his job, first as a street patrolman and later, when promoted to a more respectable position on the detective squad, she worked split shifts as a clerk in a women's clothing store on Ulitza Slivnitsa. Coming home from work in the evenings never brought him any sort of satisfaction, so he stopped instead at a neighborhood pub to drink with his buddies.

There had been other women, so many that he couldn't count them all, nor could he recall their names or their faces. From time to time he found solace in the arms of the

Ukrainian prostitutes that roamed the streets not far from the port. A quick handover of Bulgarian lev would purchase a female's hands, or lips, to help release everything building up inside him. Anything was better than going home to face his wretched wife.

You are a bastard, Boyko Stanchev. You do not know how to properly treat a woman!

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He was glad she had left him. Who knew where she was today. He didn't care. At least he had been smart enough to keep the tiny apartment after moving to Sofia to work with SANS.

But now he had other things to think about, with only glasses of rakia to keep him company.

He thought back to the briefing at the airport, and about his outburst at hearing Zhekov's words. They were to work with the Israelis. The orders were unacceptable, the situation incomprehensible. The very thought of yielding some of Bulgaria's sovereign interest in this case and sharing the responsibilities with foreigners sickened him. He had hoped his concerns would be shared by his former colleagues, but Milen and Kamen soaked up Zhekov's directives like the commander's faithful lapdogs they were, Boyko thought, laughing to himself. Zhekov had those men on a leash and they would chase whatever bone he threw their way.

Boyko had a history with each of those men, and the history was not pleasant. He had worked with them during his years on the force; he knew them too well. Zhekov, he could deal with. Boyko was familiar with the commander's eccentricities and demands. Zhekov was a politician's policeman, or maybe he was a police officer's politician. He always seemed to be campaigning for everyone's support, so it was easy to get on his good side. And you stayed in his good graces as long as you did your job properly. As for Milen and Kamen, they were something else altogether.

Milen may be a competent-enough detective, Boyko thought, but the only loyalties that man had were to his own career. When working together, Milen had refused to regard Boyko as a true partner. Boyko's suggestions and theories didn't count for anything; it was Milen, as senior investigating officer, who determined where they would go, whom they would question, and how they would tackle their cases. With detectives like Milen not offering him any support, Boyko had been happy to quit the force and move to Sofia. He couldn't wait to leave these inconsiderate assholes behind. Let them flounder in Burgas Bay!

As for Kamen, Kamen was just plain shit. He didn't trust Kamen at all. He knew, for a fact, that the short, bothersome man constantly conspired behind his back, secretly working to discredit Boyko whenever and wherever he could. When Boyko took down the most notorious mob boss in Bulgaria, it had been Kamen who sought to belittle the achievement, stating that Boyko's role in the case had been a minor one. Boyko didn't deserve the credit he received, Kamen charged. For years, Boyko had tried to ignore the man, but he knew he would never find peace working on the same squad as the bastardly Kamen.

Well, Milen and Kamen, I'm back! Boyko said to himself. I work for SANS now. We may be working the same case, but the two of you are petty, low-level police detectives while I represent the country's elite security agency. It is my duty to protect Bulgaria's sovereignty,

while you fight misdemeanors and minor infringements of the law. We'll see who solves this bombing case!

A sudden bang on Boyko's front door shook him from his drunken anger. Or was the noise something imagined? It was late, very late. No, there couldn't be anyone there.

He rose unsteadily from his seat. He needed to get some sleep. He was to meet that Israeli woman in the morning. He didn't want to face her with bloodshot eyes.

He opened the door and gazed into the darkness. The hallway was empty and silent, just as he had assumed would be the case. He began to close the door when something caught his attention. The remains of a dead bird were strewn on the tiled floor. A pigeon of some kind, it made his stomach turn and his eyes began to water.

The bird had been shot; its feathers were coated with dried blood and guts from a recent encounter with a bullet. A hunter's bullet. The bird had not been killed in the tenement's hallways. No, it had been shot earlier and now its limp remains had been thrown with great force at Boyko's door. Intentionally. Boyko's head cleared instantly when he understood who had sent him this message. It was a cruelly insane gesture by someone who had it in for him. This connection from his past still constituted a clear threat.

The dead bird was a warning, a signal from the man whom Boyko knew as the Hunter—an appropriately assigned nickname stated with a capital "h." The Hunter wanted Boyko to know that his patience was running out, that Boyko's days of evading him were running short.

Boyko had assumed he was safe from the Hunter's vengeance. After all, the man was far away, locked behind bars for many years. Still, here was this damned butchered bird, a bloody message suggesting that payback was at hand.

Cruel, distressing memories sobered Boyko. That one case, that unforgettable act, had come back to haunt him. This time there would be no escape from his past. Retribution for his transgressions was unavoidable. This time he would need to pay.

Boyko kicked at the small carcass, sending a trail of entrails, blood, and feathers to splatter against the concrete wall. He swore under his breath. The Hunter was growing impatient.