

## PROLOGUE

Tell anyone you're flying into Chicago and they tell you to avoid O'Hare. Too big, too busy, too far from town. One of the worst records in America for delays in and out. Fly into Midway, they say. What they don't tell you is that it's virtually impossible to go direct from Toronto to Midway on less than a day's notice, and that's all the time I had. O'Hare it was.

It was the last week of October and we had just turned the clocks back. It was still pitch black out when I left my place in the east end of the city at 5:30 in the morning. The cab driver made it to Pearson in under half an hour, perhaps mistaking the 401 for the Autobahn. I then spent an hour crawling through security and U.S. Customs on the Toronto end and another hour at the gate. Just over an hour in the air. A half-hour sitting on the tarmac in Chicago and another half-hour to make my way to the baggage claim area and find my suitcase. It was ten o'clock Chicago time by the time I reached Arrivals.

A wall of anxious faces was looking my way. Families looking for family members. Friends looking for friends. Drivers holding cards with the names of business-class passengers. And one mountain of a man with thick dirty-blond hair and a neatly trimmed beard who bellowed my name and lifted me off my feet in a bear hug that left my ribs little room to do the breathing thing.

His name was Avi Sternberg and we hadn't seen each other in over ten years. "Jonah Geller," he grinned. "Jonah goddamn Geller. Look at you, man. You look fantastic." He gripped my biceps in his big hands. "Buff too. Check out the arms."

His teeth were whiter and straighter than they'd been when I'd last seen him and he wasn't wearing thick glasses anymore. His eyes behind contact lenses were the pale blue of a winter sky.

"You look good too," I said.

"Liar. I've put on like fifty pounds."

He'd been a beanpole then, six-three and maybe a hundred and seventy pounds. But his new-found bulk was nicely encased in an expensive gray wool suit, the kind a lawyer might wear in Chicago on an Indian summer day. And since he was a lawyer now, and there were a dozen reasons why I might need one, I didn't hold the suit against him.

"Flight okay?" he asked.

"Pretty painless," I said.

"The security as tight up there in Canada as it is here? Make you dump all your liquids and everything?"

“Even the bottled water.”

“All right. Let’s get you out of here. That all your stuff?”

“Yup.” I’d packed everything I thought I’d need into one big suitcase on wheels. The less you took on board with you, the easier it was to clear security. “I really appreciate you coming out to get me, Avi. You look like a busy man.”

“I’m paid to look this way. And don’t thank me. No one should have to make their way out of this hell-hole alone.”

He looked around, got his bearings and told me to follow him. Like a fullback clearing the way for a runner, he aimed his bulk forward and made people clear a path. A man with too many suitcases on his cart had to stop short to avoid hitting Avi and the bags went tipping over. The man cursed but Avi just kept going; didn’t hear the man or didn’t care.

When we got out of the terminal, I moved past the knot of smokers you see outside every public building nowadays and stopped to take a few deep breaths. Unclouded by jet fuel, tobacco or body odor, the fall air was crisp and fresh. Warmer than it had been in Toronto. I wondered how many people come to Chicago from a colder place.

“Listen,” Avi said, “why don’t you wait here. I’ll get the car and come around.”

“You sure? My bag’s on wheels.”

“Trust me,” he said. “It’s a schlep. Anyway, I have to check in with the office and I might have to make a call that’s privileged. I’ll be back in ten minutes. Watch for a silver Navigator.”

I pretended to be shocked. “Avi Sternberg driving an SUV? You used to say they were invented by Arabs to keep us begging for oil.”

“I’m a big guy, Jonah. I need room to move.” He turned away, pulling a cell phone out of his pocket. Then he turned back and said, “By the way? It’s Stern now. I dropped the ‘berg’ when I came back to the States.”

“You’re kidding.”

He just looked at me. It took a little getting used to, seeing his eyes undistorted by glasses.

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It took Avi twenty minutes to get back. Twenty minutes that I spent thinking about our time together on a kibbutz in northern Israel, two outsiders trying hard to be accepted by the sabras—native-born Israelis—who tended to view us as softies who weren't in it for the long haul. I thought about Dahlia Schaeffer, my lover who had been killed by a rocket fired from southern Lebanon. Avi had been her close friend, a fun platonic pal, and had been almost as devastated by her death as I was.

When he pulled up in his hulking silver beast, I heaved my bag in through the back hatch and climbed into the most comfortable car seat ever to favour my backside. He touched a button on the steering wheel and a song began playing, one I knew from the first riff: "Begin the Beguine," the first track on R.E.M.'s *Out of Time*. "Remember this?" he said. "We wore this record out on kibbutz."

"We didn't have that many to choose from."

"The days before iPods. Whatever did we do?"

We pulled away from the curb and drove all of a hundred yards before the traffic ahead forced us to a stop. "What's the population of Chicago?" I asked.

"About four million."

"They all out here today?"

"It's always like this. Once we get out of the airport, it won't be too bad."

And it wasn't. After we cleared all the construction zones around the airport, Avi took the Dan Ryan Expressway south, driving his Navigator too fast, too close to other cars. A serial lane-changer, moving to the far right lane as if exiting the expressway, then bulling his way back into traffic at the last minute. I gripped the handle above the door as he squeezed in between two trucks, focusing on the city skyline that loomed in the far-off haze like Emerald City down the yellow brick road. A distant Oz where wisdom could be received, hearts restored, courage found. Where the lost could find their way home.

"So you're an investigator now," he said.

"Uh-huh."

"Hardly what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Geez, I don't know. A social worker, maybe. An activist of some sort. Just not a PI. I mean, our firm uses PIs all the time and you just don't fit the mold."

"The ex-cop mold?"

“Yeah.”

“Truth is, I kind of backed into it. Mostly I met the right man at the right time. He thought I had what it took.”

“And what exactly are you investigating? You were very tight-lipped on the phone.” He checked his side mirror and gunned the Navigator into the passing lane, overtaking a delivery van that was trailing a cloud of burning oil.

“Three murders.”

“Three—Jesus H.” He glanced over at me, then back at the road ahead. “I thought it was some sort of fraud thing.”

“There’s a fraud at the heart of it. But it’s murder now.”

“This happened in Toronto?”

“Yes.”

“So what brings you to Chicago?”

“The killings were ordered here.”

“Is this a mob thing? The Chicago Outfit or something?”

“I almost wish it were.”

“You’re being very cryptic.”

“Because the man who ordered them is going to be a lot harder to nail than a mobster.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s Simon Birk.”

Avi’s head whipped around. He gaped at me. “*The* Simon Birk?”

“Watch it!” I planted my right foot against the floor as if my side had a brake. He looked back at the road and slammed the brake hard, stopping inches from a beat-up old Mazda with three bodies crammed in the back seat. Nearly three more deaths to add to the tally.

“You’re telling me that Simon Birk—*the* Simon Birk—had three people killed in Toronto?”

“Yes.”

“Then why aren’t the police handling it? Or are they?”

“Not so far.”

“Why not?”

“They’re not buying my theory.”

“You have proof?”

“Not enough. Not yet.”

“So you’re down here on your own.”

“Yes.”

“Going after Simon Birk.”

“Yes.”

“*The Simon Birk.*”

“Yes.”

“Jonah goddamn Geller,” he said. “You’re even crazier than I remembered.”

“That,” I said, “may be the only advantage I have.”

“Did you call me because I’m a lawyer?”

“I called because you were a friend. The only person I knew in Chicago. I didn’t even know you were a lawyer till your mother told me.”

“How long did it take her to tell you?”

“First or second sentence.”

“That’s my mom.”

“You might be able to help,” I said. “If that’s something that interests you.”

“Help you investigate Simon Birk.”

“Please don’t say *the Simon Birk* again. It’s probably how he refers to himself.”

“And who would correct him? So what kind of help?”

“Maybe shed a little light on his business practices.”

“That I could probably do. What else?”

“I don’t know. Get me out of jail if need be.”

“Jail—Jesus, what would you end up in jail for?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just got here.”

“I don’t practice criminal law.”

“This could be your chance.”

Avi used his thumb to lower the volume and R.E.M. faded away. “I think you’d better tell me everything,” he said. “What the hell happened in Toronto and why you think Birk is involved.”

“I know he is, Avi. He ordered those people killed because they were in his way.”

“Then convince me,” he said. “Because if your only friend in Chicago doesn’t believe you, who else will?”