

Chutzpah

& High Heels

The Search for Love and
Identity in the Holy Land



Chapter 1

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly . . . Israeli

It's 3:00 a.m. It's August. It's boiling outside.

I'm driving home from another bad date with another Israeli guy who has a big ego and a small—thud! clank! bang! The car starts making noises. Seeing that the normally busy city streets are empty, I panic. I know nothing about cars. I don't even like driving in this country. Wearing high heels and a revealing summer dress, I get out of the car. The heat from the street seeps through the soles of my shoes. I'm not worried about being raped, attacked, murdered, or robbed. In Tel Aviv, we worry about a different type of violence. But I don't have to worry about terrorism now. With just me in the street, the body count would be too low.

Hoping to fix the problem, I open the hood. I burn my fingers in the attempt and stare hopelessly at the engine. It might as well be an open heart.

I look around to find someone who can help me. Even though the streets are normally crowded, the only person I see is a man wearing a black wool jacket, black pants, a whitish-yellowish, button-up long-sleeve shirt, and a furry black hat walking past me on the sidewalk. I don't bother calling out to him. It's Friday night and I'm breaking the laws of the Sabbath in the Holy Land: I'm driving. I'm wearing a sexy, but appropriate-

for-the weather summer dress. I stare at him as he continues to pass me. He, dressed devoutly for a nineteenth-century Polish winter, looks through me, as if he knows the secret I've been trying to hide.

I know that as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, he avoids the gazes of all women, but it still feels personal and degrading. I cover my shoulders with my hands, trying to hide the truth. I shouldn't care what he thinks of me. I remind myself that there is no way he can tell just by looking at me. Maybe he is the reason that I'm in this country, but who is he to judge me? He isn't perfect. Besides, what is he doing walking around at this hour? Friday-night prayers were over hours ago and he isn't returning from a family dinner or Torah discussion in secular Tel Aviv. Did he spend the evening with a hooker? I wonder if he wore his kippah¹ for that.

I can't ask him for help. He won't touch a machine on the Sabbath. And even if it wasn't, he wouldn't help a stranded woman lest it cause him to have evil, sexual thoughts.

I stop looking at him and grumble to myself, "Only in Israel."

Before I have a chance to become distraught, a taxi driver pulls up like a knight in shining armor.

"Are you okay?" he asks as he gets out of the car.

Thankful, I say in Hebrew, "The car is making noises. I don't know what to do."

"Turn the car on," he orders and I obey.

After hearing the noise, he exclaims, "It's exactly what I thought. I'll fix it."

Typical Israeli man—thinking he can solve a problem before he even knows what it is. After he asks me to turn off the engine, I walk to the front of the car.

He pulls out a knife.

¹ A skullcap worn by Orthodox male Jews at all times and by men and women in other Jewish streams during prayer. The purpose of the skullcap is to remind the wearer of God's presence.

I don't flinch.

With the knife, he yanks at something in the car and cuts it loose. Like the Prophet Elijah, he proclaims, "Your car is fine. You can drive all the way to Haifa, but get it checked first thing in the morning. That will be fifty shekels."²

"Are you serious?" I balk and think to myself that this man has chutzpah.³

"Of course I'm serious. I'm a mechanic by day and taxi driver by night."

I should point out that it is the middle of the night. With my hands on my hips, I ask, "If you charge for being a Good Samaritan, are you still one?"

He holds out his hand. Palm up.

Rolling my eyes, I growl, "Only in Israel."

I get back in the car and start driving.

Thirty seconds later, boom! thump! kurplunk! The noises are louder and scarier than before. I pull over and look around. The roads are empty. The taxi driver and my fifty shekels are nowhere in sight. I start to cry.

Who should I call? I can't call my dad; he is across the ocean. I'd needlessly worry him. Besides, what American Jew understands cars? If I need medical, legal, or financial advice I'll call an American Jew, but for car advice . . . I need an Israeli. I don't want to call the guy I was just on a date with because I'm afraid he won't pick up or would refuse to come.

Through my tears, I scan my cell's phonebook. I stop at "Bar." He has been there through thick and thin. Like me, he is a new immigrant to Israel. Well, after nearly ten years here, we aren't really new anymore.

² \$1 (USD) is approximately 4 shekels

³ Actually pronounced in Hebrew, with a guttural "ch" for an extra crude affect. Very much an onomatopoeia, chutzpah means both bravery and rudeness.

With a French accent, Bar answers with a groggy, “Hello . . . Are you okay?” Through my sobs, I explain that I’m stuck.

“I’m already coming,” he says, using the Hebrew expression.

New immigrants always stick together.

While trying to calm down, I look up and see a young man in his car pulling up next to my car. He sees my chest heaving and tears rolling down my face. He asks me if I need help. Alone and panicking, I quickly explain that a friend is on the way.

“Yihyeh b’seder! Everything will be okay!” he says.

During my years in Israel, I learned that a broken bone, heart, or bank account warrant this same predictable response from an Israeli doctor, therapist, or investment banker.

After asking me again if I need anything, he drives away.

Twenty minutes pass and Bar still isn’t here. I look around. The roads are oddly deserted. The street light above the car suddenly burns out. My ears begin buzzing from the silence. I squeeze the wheel. My breathing speeds and gets shallower as I feel more and more stranded. My hands become tingly. I look out my window, hoping that I’ll see Bar, and right next to me is another car. I didn’t even hear it pull up. It isn’t Bar. I begin to panic. I try to start the car again, but it won’t turn over. The tinted window of the car next to me slowly opens. On the other side is the smiling face of the guy who, twenty minutes ago, told me, “Yihyeh b’seder.”

“I couldn’t stop thinking of you crying on the side of the road,” he says as he reaches out the window and hands me a box of tissues, a bottle of water, and a chocolate bar. He then drives away, disappearing as quickly as he appeared.

I may not know his name, but he makes me feel like I have a home in this country. I can’t help but wonder if he would still treat me as if I belong if he knew my secret. With a smile, I sigh and think to myself, “Only in Israel.” And before I have a

chance to further question my place in Israel, Bar pulls up to save me from the loneliness of the night and my thoughts.