

Neither Here Nor There, Chapter 1

ESTY's insides turned somersaults as she crossed the familiar street, stepping on the lines of the light railway. In one sense, nothing had changed. Walking along Jaffa Road to the main post office was something she'd done many times. Her clothes – skirt well below the knees, sleeves that covered her elbows, black tights – were the ones she was used to, her handbag the one she usually carried.

And yet, in her mind, Esty knew that today couldn't be more different. The first day of a completely different life. Her handbag might look the same as usual to any observer, but she knew it contained documents she would need on the other side. In her purse was all the money she'd managed to put together without making anyone suspicious. She was about to be a different person – the person she'd long felt she should have been.

But she wasn't there yet. Now, she was in limbo, neither here nor there.

At the entrance to the post office, Esty opened her bag for the security guard and felt a sudden shock wave pass through her. Would he wonder why she was carrying all those documents? A moment later she reproached herself. Idiot. He's not looking for documents.

Esty passed through the metal detector and retrieved her bag. So far so good. Now what? To the right was a shop selling stationery, mobile phones and stamp albums. She remembered as a child being fascinated by the exotic stamps, knowing she could look but never buy. To the left was a large room with counters along one wall and rows of seats, many of them occupied. She didn't want to ask questions, to have people remember her if 'they' came looking for her. Would they do that? She wasn't sure. Best to avoid people who worked here if possible.

She walked across the large hall, doing her best to keep her eyes averted from all the people. At the other end of the room she passed through an open doorway and saw what she wanted – a row of telephones in a deserted corridor. But... how did you use these phones? The pictures seemed to show inserting a card. What sort of card? A credit card? Whatever it was, Esty didn't have one. How could she find out what to do?

Back in the main hall, people were sitting clutching tickets and waiting for their number to be called. Esty had seen this before – at the healthcare clinic, for instance. Did she have to take a ticket from the machine and wait, just to ask her silly question? She glanced at the people sitting there. Some of them were like her – or rather, like she had been. What if one of them recognised her and started talking to her? That would be awful. And how was she going to manage now? How was she going to solve the phone problem? She blinked a tear away.

The young man – where had he come from? He'd asked her something. What was it? Was she all right?

"Yes. That is..." She wouldn't have pursued it, but there was something about his face. It showed kindness, and worry... worry about her, even though he wasn't one of her people... her former people. "Do you know how those phones work... how you pay for the call?"

She gestured to the corridor, and he went back there with her and examined one of the phones. "I think you need a phone card. You can probably buy it at one of the counters." Despite all her anxieties, Esty noticed the foreign accent in his Hebrew speech. He sounded like a native English speaker, but not American – possibly

English. She recognised the almost-not-existent R sound, as opposed to the American nasal one, and the Israeli one rolled at the back of the throat. And she noticed his voice – so pleasant-sounding and gentle. Such concern in those deep brown eyes.

Esty glanced towards the counters. She must have still looked worried, because the man said, “Would you like to use my mobile? It’s all right,” he added, holding it out to her when he saw Esty hesitating.

“Thank you.” Esty felt her cheeks burning as she took the phone.

With his arm, the man pointed to the rows of seats. “I’ll wait for you in there.”

So nice of him to let her make the call in private, but... Esty frowned at the contraption in her hand. “How do you...?”

“Press the numbers and then press this button. Is it here in Jerusalem?”

Esty nodded.

“So press zero-two and then the number.”

As the man left her for the other room, Esty took the pencil and paper out of her pocket and unfolded the paper to see the number, although she really knew it by heart. How silly of her. The person she needed to call probably was in Jerusalem, but the number was a mobile. She’d never owned a mobile phone herself, but she’d made phone calls to people with mobile phones before and knew that mobile numbers began with zero-five. She could feel her heart racing, but nevertheless managed to follow the nice man’s instructions and suddenly there was a ringing tone and the voice of another man. “Hello?”

Heart pounding, she recited the piece she’d rehearsed many times. “My name is Esty Sherman and I’ve just left my home in the ultra-orthodox... the haredi community and I don’t want to go back there. I want to be secular. Can you help me? Is this the right place?”

“Yes, this is the right place, but I have to ask you some questions first. How old are you?”

“Nineteen.” Despite her thumping heart, Esty noticed the man’s gentle, friendly tones.

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Who knows that you’re doing this?”

“No one.”

“I see. I have to explain, Esty. We are a voluntary organisation that helps people who leave the haredi community, but we don’t persuade or encourage anyone to leave. That’s a decision you have to make by yourself. You could go back now and no one would know you ever thought of leaving. If you continue, you run a very big risk of cutting yourself off from your friends and family – even your parents.”

“I understand that.”

“If you do leave, things will be very hard for you at first. In the worst-case scenario, you’ll want to change your mind and go back, but they won’t accept you any more. Are you prepared for that?”

“Yes. I’ve thought about it and I’m sure I want to do this.”

“Esty, if you have any doubts, then go back now while you still can.”

“No, I want to go ahead with it. I know it’ll be hard, but I’m absolutely certain it’s the right thing for me to do.”

“In that case, I’m going to give you my address. I want you to go there now and I’ll meet you there. My name is Avi – Avi Slonim. Do you have a pen and paper?”

“Yes.”

Avi gave Esty an address in the neighbourhood of Malcha. Esty had heard of Malcha from occasional visits to the Jerusalem Mall – the large shopping centre to the south west of the city. She remembered looking up at the newish blocks of flats all over the hillside and wondering what it would be like to live in them, with those families. It would be a completely different sort of life, she'd been sure of that. She remembered musing how babies begin life so similar but very quickly become a part of their environment. If she'd been born to one of those families, for instance, she'd have worn different clothes, attended different schools, learnt different subjects, kept different traditions and held different beliefs. Only a quirk of fate – or God's will, as she'd always thought of it – had determined the family she would be born into. Now she was about to visit one of those flats, where she'd see for herself how those families lived.

"Where are you now?" Avi asked.

"At the main post office."

"You have to take the number seventeen bus. The easiest way for you is to walk or ride along Jaffa Road to Davidka Square and catch the bus from there. Take the seventeen going towards the Malcha Mall and get off four stops after the shopping centre. Of course, the bus might not stop at all of them, so you'd be better off asking for my street. Can you manage that?"

"Yes." Normally, that would be easy for Esty. She'd taken buses, even outside the city. She'd often visited her father's parents in Bnei Brak, the religious town close to secular Tel-Aviv. On the bus there had often been secular people, too. Sometimes she'd sat next to a secular woman, but she'd never spoken to one. In the summertime, she'd observed the bare legs beneath a short skirt and the bare arms, wondering if the clothes were worn for comfort or to lure men as her teachers sometimes implied.

But this day was far from normal, and the short bus journey she had to undertake made her anxious. Above all, she was terrified of meeting someone she knew. How would she handle it?

"Good. I'll see you there then."

Esty removed the phone from her ear and was just wondering how to end the call when the young man reappeared. He must have been watching her, but Esty was sure he couldn't have heard anything.

"I didn't know how to..."

"That's okay." He took the phone back, pressed a button and slipped it into his pocket.

"Thank you so much."

"No problem. Will you be all right now?" The man tilted his head a little and raised his eyebrows, causing Esty to feel a flutter inside over the continuing somersaults.

"Oh yes. Thank you." Esty managed a smile before rushing off to begin her journey.

Stepping out of the post office, Esty began to retrace her steps back along Jaffa Road, walking round the dawdlers and shop window gazers and the people waiting for the next train.

The man in the post office had lightened her mood. He was proof that there were good people on the other side of the divide she was crossing. More than ever, she felt ready for her new future, whatever it held in store for her. And she would face it with her head held high.

As she looked up from the pavement, her smile vanished. Coming towards her was her worst nightmare, in the form of Mrs Greenspan.