

I MEANT TO TELL YOU

a novel by

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IN HER YELLOW CAR SEAT BEHIND MIRANDA, Tali danced her soft stuffed fox on its two rear legs and sang loudly in a mix of Hebrew and English: “Here comes the sun. Here comes *ba-shemesh*.”

Ronit, in the passenger seat up front, screwed and unscrewed the cap of her water bottle. Shut. Open.

Miranda lifted her hand off the steering wheel to wave backwards at Tali, and the car swerved briefly. “Hey, over there,” Miranda called.

“Hey, up there.” Tali giggled.

Turning partly around, Ronit also waved. Then she checked her watch.

The highway guardrails glided by like ribbons unfurling. Rain slapped the windshield in front of Miranda as the sky darkened and they crossed the Potomac River from Maryland into Virginia.

Glancing toward Ronit, Miranda mouthed: *Are you okay?*

Ronit leaned forward and fiddled with the radio, until Celine Dion’s clear soprano abruptly drowned out any other sound. “*For every dream you made come true/For all the love I found—*” Before the line was finished, Ronit stabbed the button for a different station. Very softly, her mouth barely an inch from Miranda’s ear, she whispered, “It will be fine after we land in Tel Aviv. I’ll call Tim from my parents’ apartment.”

“He’s going to be furious.”

A minivan was slicing into their lane directly in front of them. Raggedly, Miranda moved leftward; the car just behind her in that lane immediately honked. “Sorry. Sorry,” she mumbled.

“I have spent six years—” Ronit’s voice rose; Miranda quickly put a finger on her own lips, nodding toward Tali. “I have spent six years,” Ronit repeated more quietly, “doing what Tim wants so he won’t be furious.”

“I know.”

“I made the coffee too strong. I made it too weak. I put Tali to bed too early. I put her to bed too late.”

“I know.”

“He cut up my driver’s license, Miranda! He canceled my credit cards! He said he makes all the money, so he’ll decide how I spend it.”

“He’s crazy.”

“If I don’t go now, before he figures out somehow to block Tali’s passport...” Ronit crossed her arms on the dashboard. “Last week ...”

“What happened last week?”

“He just—He told me he would get custody of Tali, because my English isn’t good enough.”

“What? That can’t be true.”

“I don’t know. He makes me so upset, I forget all my English.”

“He hasn’t—done anything again—in front of Tali?”

“Not since my wrist.”

“Tali doesn’t talk about it?”

“No, thank God.”

“That’s good. I guess.” Miranda tapped the steering wheel, keeping her hands more or less at nine and three. Raindrops were plopping more heavily now. Brenda had said that the dashboard lights on the Toyota sometimes blinked for no reason, but she hadn’t mentioned that the windshield wipers squeaked and missed big patches when they swept the glass. “You’re sure he doesn’t know about this trip?”

“How could he know? Who would tell him?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t tell Brenda why you wanted her car?”

“Of course not. And you did everything on the list? You prepaid your rent for next month? You forwarded the mail to me?”

“*Betach*. Yes, yes.” Ronit unscrewed the water bottle cap again. “It will all be okay, as soon as we’re in Israel.”

“I just worry... I could see Tim spying on you. Following us.” The rearview mirror showed only the lights from the angry car that Miranda had cut off, but it was definitely possible to imagine Tim, his fingers gripping the wheel of the old black BMW, his brown hair falling over his eyes, tearing

down the interstate after them at seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five. Even in the rain. Coming right up against Brenda's trunk. Did he have any idea what kind of car Brenda owned?

"I'm sorry I'm bringing you into all my problems." Ronit began hitting her lap with her water bottle while she spoke.

"It's okay. That's what friends are for."

"I just need my family, for a while. I need my mother."

Tali had fallen asleep, her head resting against the side of her car seat, her dark curls squished underneath her cheek.

"Tim always has some reason why Tali and I can't go to Israel, not even to visit for three days. Every year. Even before we started this divorce."

Washington Dulles International Airport, five miles, a sign said.

Brenda's faded air freshener, swinging from the rearview mirror, reeked of sickly-sweet pine. The radio announced a spring sale at Sears.

"When are you going to tell your lawyer?" Miranda asked.

Ronit turned the radio louder. "Maybe tomorrow. The lawyers can finish the divorce without me. They're almost done anyway."

"I still think you should've...."

Tali stirred; her fox dropped to the floor.

The windshield wipers smeared water.

The car behind them honked.

Ronit checked her watch.

"I'll get you to the airport in plenty of time, don't worry."

Rain.

White lines.

Guardrails.

Exit sign.

The asphalt underneath Brenda's red Toyota rolled away at seventy miles an hour, onward to Ronit and Tali's waiting El Al airplane.

Two miles.

THEY HAD TO WAKE TALI WHEN THEY PARKED in the short-term lot at Dulles. Lifting the girl out of the car seat, Miranda rested her, full-length, against her own body, her arms wrapped in an X across the small back in its thick jacket. She nestled her cheek against the curls matted around

Tali's warm neck. Tali murmured and wriggled closer. "Eema? Aunt Randa?"

"You can carry her?" Ronit asked. "She's heavy, I think." She kissed the top of Tali's head.

"She smells so sweet. Like apple juice."

Tali wobbled a little as Miranda lowered her to the ground, and Miranda kept an arm around her shoulders. Ronit picked up Tali's little yellow suitcase and the fox in her left hand, pulling her own wheeled bag behind her with her right. They walked slowly to the terminal.

The El Al counter was mobbed, the check-in line snaking around two turns. "Saturday night," Ronit whispered to Miranda. "There are no flights on Shabbat, so now, after sundown, now everyone wants to go to Israel." At least five ultra-Orthodox families were spread through the line and the nearby rows of plastic chairs, the women with smart black caps atop their wigs and solid-colored skirts falling below their knees, the men in identical wide-brimmed black fedoras and long black overcoats over black suits and white shirts. A flurry of boys darted in and around the chairs, their side curls flying. There was also a pair of hikers with tall, metal-framed backpacks and a tour group in matching blue T-shirts whose leader held up a vivid royal-blue-and-white sign: "Arlington JCC." Tinny-voiced announcements echoed through the glaringly bright concourse. "*Keep your personal belongings in your sight at all times.*" "*Smoking is permitted in designated areas of the airport only.*"

"I'll stay with you as long as I can," Miranda offered. "I guess, until you get to the security machines."

"I think we leave the suitcase at these counters first. Then the people from El Al will ask us a lot of questions. They're so stupid. 'Where are you staying in Israel? Why are you staying there? What Jewish holidays do you celebrate? What do you do on Friday nights?'" Ronit took Tali's hand.

Tali grabbed the fox. "Where're we going, Eema?"

"For an adventure. You'll see."

"I'm going to miss both of you." Gently, Miranda twirled a silky cluster of Tali's hair, until Tali shook free.

"We'll miss you, too. So many years we've been friends. You've been like I have a third sister."

"Your mother's cauliflower-pomegranate salad."

"The silly statue with the fish."

“Here.” Miranda slid the bigger suitcase away from Ronit. “Let me do something to help.” They inched a step forward in the queue. “How long do you think you’re going to stay there?”

Instead of replying, Ronit craned her head toward the front of the line, and Tali tugged at the hem of Miranda’s windbreaker. “Aunt Randa, guess what? *Eema* got a squirting thing that makes roses for icings, so we’re going to make cupcakes with yellow roses.”

“That sounds delicious.”

“And beautiful,” Tali added.

It was their turn at the counter. Miranda hoisted Ronit’s bag onto the scale, as Ronit gave her and Tali’s tickets and passports to the agent.

“Ah, I hope the suitcase isn’t too heavy for the weight limit,” Ronit murmured.

Someone was pushing behind them; impatient travelers trying to jump the line? The ticket agent was starting to ask Ronit something.

“Don’t move! Police!”

A powerful light was flashing in Miranda’s face. Tali’s fox was yanked away. Tali was screaming, Ronit was screaming, there were shouts behind her, in front of her, loud voices, deep voices, angry voices, two strong hands had grabbed Miranda’s hand, both hands, thrust them behind her back, there was hard heavy metal around her wrists, something hit her shin—It was Tali’s little suitcase, cracking open; a snowfall of papers and clothes flipped against her. Then a rough hand was pulling Miranda backwards away from the counter, from Tali, from the suitcase, cinching tight around her upper arm, like a vise, and something scratched, something stung sharply; “Ronit!” she yelled, “Ronit, what’s happening?” and Ronit was crying, and Miranda’s shoulder bag was sliding down her arm, banging her hip, while two hands now dragged her, and her feet jerked hard, again and again across the ice-slippery tiled floor, big tiles of green and grey and white, and the steel slapped against her wrists each time her feet hit the tile. More lights were flashing. More voices shouted, called, demanded; in English, in Yiddish, in Hebrew. *What the hell? What did those women do? That poor little girl.* “Tali!” Ronit screamed. “Daddy!” Tali shouted.

“You are under arrest,” a man declared sternly, somewhere near Miranda’s ears, “for violation of federal statute 18-1204 and Maryland code 9-305.

Attempting to remove a child from the United States with intent to obstruct the lawful exercise of parental rights, and acting as an accessory to abduct a child to a place that is outside of the United States.”

“Come on, Tali,” Tim’s calm voice said. “Let’s go home.”