

Chapter Three

Margaret brought us our coats and said good night. June went to powder her nose before we left, and Margaret turned to go. I could see she didn't want to have the conversation we were about to have. I wondered why. What had happened? Should I be worried?

"Not so fast, Margaret," I said. "Talk to me."

"I don't have time. I have to clean up."

"It can wait a few minutes. Where's David? Why isn't he here?"

"He couldn't make it."

"Did something happen?"

"Don't worry. He's okay. Sort of."

I was suddenly alarmed. "What do you mean?"

She gave me a hard look. "When was the last time you talked to him?"

"I'm not sure. A few months. Where is he? What happened?"

"Your precious grandson has found religion. He's dropped out of college and joined Chabad."

I was stunned. "Are you serious?"

"I'm absolutely serious. Your grandson has become a Chassid."

"But why?" I was still trying to get used to the idea.

"I guess he's found God. At least, he thinks so. He doesn't believe that God lives in this house as well."

"What do you mean? David doesn't live at home anymore?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We're not kosher enough for him. He wanted to bring in his own food and eat in his room."

"Well, considering the situation, that seems like a good idea."

“Not to me. I put my foot down. I said that if he can’t eat in my kitchen he should find somewhere else to live.”

“So you threw him out of the house.”

“I told him the door was open whenever he came to his senses.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it.”

“Where did he go?”

“He said he’s moving to Crown Heights.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Two months ago.” She paused. “I’m sure you blame me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Don’t give me your sarcasm. I did what I had to do. I couldn’t let David become a Chassidic fanatic. I had to be firm. He’ll come back. Mark my words, he’ll be back. That life is not for him.”

“So you haven’t spoken to him in two months.”

“That’s right. As I understand, you haven’t either. What’s your excuse?”

“I just got busy. I didn’t throw him out. If I knew what was going on, I would’ve called him every day.”

“What good would that have done? Do you think you could’ve changed his mind? I don’t think so. Not even his precious grandfather could budge him. It was like an evil spell had come over him.”

“I don’t know if I could’ve changed his mind, but I could’ve given him my support. I could have shown him that I love him no matter what.”

“So you would’ve given him money?”

“If he needed it.”

“You would have reinforced his bad behavior.” Margaret is a professor of psychology. She speaks like that. I don’t envy her students.

Just then, June came back.

“What bad behavior?” she asked.

“Not important,” said Margaret. “Have a safe trip back.”

June gave Margaret a peck on the cheek, and we left. You may have

noticed that I didn't kiss Margaret good night. I haven't kissed her in years.

As soon as we got into the car, I told June about my conversation with Margaret, as close to verbatim as I could. She patted my hand and said nothing. June never says anything just for the sake of responding. I knew that she felt my hurt. That was all I needed from her right then.

I took out my cell phone and opened my list of favorites. I clicked on David and put the phone to my ear. After six rings, I got voice mail.

"Hey, you've reached David. Please leave a message."

The sound of his voice sparked a feeling of intense love in my heart. David was the apple of my eye, as the saying goes. When he was growing up, we were as close as grandfather and grandson could be. By the time he was ten, he could draw a rough map of the world and identify most of the major cities. He read a lot of history and well-researched historical fiction. He was a whiz at math. You could have a fairly deep conversation with him about politics and science.

When Helen, my first wife, was in the advanced stages of multiple sclerosis, David was my greatest emotional support. He was my rock. We formed an incredibly deep bond. There's nothing I wouldn't have done for him, but he gave me his love without expecting anything in return.

When Margaret told me that my precious grandson had found religion, as I mentioned before, there was an extensive subtext to it. I believe she was jealous of my relationship with David, considering that her own relationship with me when she was growing up was quite rocky to say the least. I don't know whose fault that was. She always blamed me. Since I was the adult, she used to say, the blame was always mine. Perhaps she was right, but I guess I didn't have the wisdom, the patience and the sensitivity to handle her properly.

After she married, things got better between us. Not because my very rich and very compliant son-in-law, Gerald Goldfield, was such a good influence. He was no influence at all; she overpowered him. Nonetheless, I suppose that once she had her own lavish home, she resented me less. That

is, until David and I bonded in a way she and I never did. When Helen became ill and gave up her job as a paralegal, Margaret and David spent a lot of time in our home. I guess it took a deadly illness to bring a thaw to our relationship.

After Helen died, the thaw did not last long. During the last few years of my wife's illness, I was essentially alone. I met June six months after Helen passed away, and we married a few months later. Helen had told me many times that she wanted me to remarry. She even suggested some of the widows we knew, but I stopped her there.

June, my second wife, was a dermatologist from Brookline, Massachusetts. She came from a fine family. Her father was a Harvard ophthalmologist and her mother an administrator in the Boston College School of Nursing. Nice people. Her first husband, an army doctor, was killed in Iraq. June was an intelligent person of excellent character with a subtle sense of humor. We really hit it off. I was sure Helen would have been pleased. She wanted me to be happy.

Margaret, however, did not exactly welcome June with open arms, but she understood that I needed to remarry. Relations between Margaret and June were cordial but not close, and that suited everyone.

Two years after June and I married, I endowed a wing of Monteverde Children's Hospital in Helen's honor; it was a cause near and dear to her heart. Because of my prominence as a Congressman and an author, the endowment was reported in the newspapers. A nosy reporter discovered that I had left my estate to the hospital and my brownstone to June. Margaret and Gerald were wealthy, extremely wealthy. She didn't need my money, so I thought I'd put it to good use after I am gone.

Margaret could not accept what I had done. She considered it a betrayal of the worst sort. Our thawed relationship began to freeze up again. Things got much worse at David's bar-mitzvah. When Margaret got up to make a toast, she mentioned just about everyone at the party, but she did not mention me or June, a glaring omission. June told me to forget it, that it

didn't deserve my emotional energy, but I was furious.

Since then, our relationship has been frosty. We only met at family gatherings. She did not invite us to her home, and she declined our invitations. But to her credit, she did not prevent me from taking David out for pizza and a ballgame from time to time. And of course, I was able to spend time with David at family gatherings. We were very close.

In recent years, however, we did not see each other as often as I would have liked. He was in college, and he had a girlfriend. We conversed at social events. We didn't go to ballgames as in the past, but we spoke on the phone once in a while. Our relationship adapted to an adult level, and it was good. It was more than good. It was wonderful.

I was looking forward to seeing David at the Passover Seder. It would have been the highlight of my evening. Besides, of course, seeing my dear father presiding at the head of the Seder table. And now, he wasn't even answering his phone. What was he doing in Crown Heights? Why wasn't he answering his phone?

I was worried.