

Chapter Four

Crown Heights runs from Prospect Park and the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library in Grand Army Plaza all the way to Brownville, bisected end to end by Eastern Parkway. Margaret lives in Park Slope, which is the next neighborhood over. I'd never been to Crown Heights or even given it much thought. My capable secretary, however, researched it and told me what to expect.

Crown Heights used to be an old middle-class neighborhood well represented by all stripes of Jewish people. In the post-War era, the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Chassidim grew rapidly until it became the dominant group. Chabad is an evangelistic movement with branches in hundreds of cities and towns, but the world headquarters is in Crown Heights, as are its elite yeshivos.

Demographics changed. Many Jewish families and institutions moved away, and for the most part, black families took their place. Chabad, however, did not budge. The leader of the movement, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, insisted that the community stay with their black neighbors, and stay they did. The community flourished in an expanding cluster around the main synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway. The Lubavitchers call it 770 and view the old brownstone as a holy temple with mystical dimensions. The Chabad synagogue in Jerusalem is a faithful replica of 770.

If David had joined Chabad and gone to Crown Heights, it was reasonable to assume he would still be there. I didn't think they send new recruits into the field. I was hoping I would find him there.

The next morning, after I came to my office, I called for my driver to take me to Crown Heights at noon. I don't have a steady driver. I always walk to my office and take cabs when I have to go somewhere in the city.

My car stays in the garage most of the time. When I need it, a limousine service provides me with a driver for as long as I need it. My favorite is Pedro Bolivar, and I asked for him. While I waited for Pedro to pick up my car, I went through my messages and made sure everything in the office was running smoothly. In the meantime, I kept dialing David's number but with no response.

Pedro was wearing chauffeur's livery that day; he was probably coming from another assignment. He opened the passenger side door, and I got in.

"*Buenos dias, Señor Taylor,*" he said. "*Como esta?*" He knew I liked to converse in Spanish, but I wasn't in the mood.

"*Desculpame, Señor Bolivar, pero no puedo hoy. Estoy ocupado. Hablamos inglés, por favor.*"

"*Como quiere, patron.* Where are we going?"

"Crown Heights."

"They told me. What's the address?"

"I don't know."

He shrugged and put the car in gear. "You're the boss."

"Do you know your way around Crown Heights?"

"Sure."

"Let's start with the old synagogue. Do you know where it is?"

"Sure. 770."

"That's right. Go there first."

We took the FDR Drive down to the Manhattan Bridge into Brooklyn, and fifteen minutes later we were cruising down Eastern Parkway. It's a beautiful street with pedestrian islands between the six-lane road and the service roads. The corner of Eastern Parkway and Nostrand Avenue was a bustling hub of black businesses. After we crossed New York Avenue in the service road, the sidewalks were thronged with Chassidic men in prayer shawls and black fedoras. We pulled up at 770 on the corner of Eastern Parkway and Kingston Avenue. I told Pedro to keep his phone on and climbed out.

I made my way up the stairs and entered a vestibule redolent with the musty smell of old books and prayer shawls. The door on the right opened into a small synagogue. A few men sat in front of open books, humming and rocking back and forth.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Can anyone help me?”

A red-bearded young fellow in white shirtsleeves and the signature black fedora jumped to his feet.

“How can I help? Are you looking for someone?”

“I’m looking for my grandson. Is this the Chabad synagogue?”

“It used to be a long time ago. The synagogue is downstairs.”

“What’s up here?”

“Offices.”

“Maybe there’s someone in the office who can help me find my grandson. They must have a register.”

“The office is closed. It’s Passover, Mr. ... I didn’t catch your name.” He extended his hand. “My name is Zapadnik. Zalman Zapadnik. Pleased to meet you.”

I had no choice. I shook his hand and gave my name. “Adrian Taylor.”

His eyes widened. “Hey, I recognize you. You’re the Congressman.”

“Well, not anymore.” It makes me uncomfortable when people call me Congressman. It was just a youthful indiscretion. I wanted to accomplish something for society and thought I might do so in Congress. Two terms of sniping and frustration, and all I have to show for it are four years wasted and a bombastic title whose emptiness makes me cringe.

“Let me take you downstairs,” said Zalman. “We’ll find someone who can help you find your grandson.”

We descended a claustrophobic creaky stairway, reeking with age, which could accommodate only one traffic direction at a time. We emerged into a large auditorium near a row of sinks. I smelled chlorine in the air and assumed a ritual bath was not too far away. A broad staircase to the left led to street level. Ahead was a cavernous room with wall-to-wall tables and

benches packed with noisy young and older men dressed like my guide Zalman and with the same body language. Almost all of them were gesticulating and talking at once. I couldn't hear myself think.

Zalman brought me to a heavyset man with a stringy gray beard and a forehead covered with perspiration.

"Mendel, this gentleman is looking for his grandson," said Zalman.

Mendel looked at me, and his eyebrows rose. "Aren't you the Congressman?"

"I should've put on dark glasses and a mustache," I said.

"You're welcome here," said Mendel. He stuck out his hand. "Mendel Futerman. How can I help you?"

"I believe my grandson is here."

"What's his name?"

"David Goldfield. I've been calling him all last night and today, and he doesn't answer his phone."

"I see. Do you know that observant Jews are not supposed to speak on the phone on Shabbos or the festivals? It's Passover today. Is your grandson observant?"

"I don't know. I heard that he joined Chabad two months ago."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"And you've come to take him away?"

"No, of course not. He's an adult. He makes his own decisions. I just want to make sure he's okay. I missed him at the Seder last night."

"I see. Well, if he's a beginner, he's probably at the yeshivah in Morristown, New Jersey. I can make some inquiries for you after the holiday. We'll find him."

"Do all beginners go to Morristown?"

"No, there are other yeshivos for beginners, but Morristown is the biggest and the best. If he really joined Chabad, chances are he's there."

"Are there any yeshivos in Crown Heights?"

“A couple, but your best bet is Morristown.”

“Knowing my grandson, I think he’d want to stay in Crown Heights at the center of things. Where are the yeshivos in the neighborhood?”

“Maybe he should try Magen Menachem,” offered Zalman.

“Why not?” said Mendel. He turned to me. “If your grandson isn’t there, they’ll direct you to the other yeshivos. There are just a few.”

“Great. I’ll start there. Could you give me the address?”

“I’ll take you there,” said Zalman.

“I don’t want to impose,” I said. “Just give me directions.”

“It’s no imposition. I’ll be glad to take you there.”

“All right, I accept your offer. You’re very kind. We’ll go in my car. I have a driver outside. You can direct him. He’ll drive you back when we get there.”

“It’s a beautiful day, Mr. Taylor. Let’s walk.”

“I don’t want to take too much of your time. Let’s just go by car. My driver is right outside. You’ll be back here in a few minutes.”

Zalman exchanged glances with Mendel. “Well, you see, Mr. Taylor, we’re not supposed to ride in a car on the holiday.”

“Oh, I see. On second thought, let’s walk. Is it far?”

“No, about ten minutes.”

“Perfect.”

We walked to the corner and turned up Kingston Avenue. All the shops were closed and secured. The street had a generally shabby look, but the people seemed cheery and purposeful. The women and the children were well-dressed, while the men all looked like Zalman and Mendel. We walked five blocks until we came to Montgomery Street and turned right. Halfway up the block, we stopped in front of an old-fashioned two-family house, which was a duplicate of its neighbors. There were two exterior doors side by side, one for the ground level apartment and one for the upstairs.

A small sign with Hebrew lettering was pasted to the door of the ground level apartment. I’d long forgotten how to read Hebrew, but I assumed this

was Magen Menachem. There was a big picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the window. We had reached our destination. I didn't need Zalman's help anymore, so I thanked him and wished him a happy Passover.

The door was open, as you would expect in a yeshivah. A middle-aged rabbi with a short brown beard streaked with gray sat at a table with four young fellows in jeans and colorful tee shirts, obviously beginners.

"Can I help you?" said the rabbi. He extended his hand. "I'm Rabbi Sholom Ber Gutmacher."

I shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Rabbi Gutmacher. I'm Adrian Taylor. I'm looking for my grandson. I was told he might be here."

"What's his name?"

"David Goldfield. Do you know him?"

"Certainly. He's one of my students."

"Is he here?"

"No, I'm afraid he's not."

"Do you know where he is?"

"He's in Katmandu."

"Katmandu? Are you sure? Katmandu?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Katmandu is the capital of Nepal."

"I know where Katmandu is, but what's he doing there? And why doesn't he answer my phone calls?"

"He may not have service up in the Himalaya Mountains. When did you call him?"

"Last night. Today." Again, I realized the inanity of my question. "Of course, it's Passover. He can't pick up the phone."

"That's right."

"So why is he there?"

"He's helping Chabad of Nepal conduct the Passover Seder. They have a couple of thousand Israelis for the Seder every year. They need all the help they can get."