

Chapter Five

David returned from Nepal a week after Passover. He heard I'd been looking for him, and he called to tell me he was fine. I invited him for dinner. I promised to get him something from a kosher restaurant. He chuckled and said I shouldn't bother. He'd bring a sandwich.

I almost didn't recognize him when he came to the door. He had a scraggly beard and a crumpled black fedora. I hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, and he responded with equal warmth.

David joined us for dinner. June had gone to a kosher restaurant and brought back an assortment of cold foods, properly wrapped and sealed so that David could eat without any concerns. We feasted on kosher sandwiches, salads and cold Heinekens, and we talked about his experiences in Katmandu. Then June went to her study to make calls and do paperwork, and we were left alone.

"So what's going on, David?" I asked.

"About what?"

"Columbia, law school, your girlfriend, Chabad, your mother, anything you care to talk about. We haven't had a real conversation in a while. If you don't want to talk, you don't have to say anything. But whatever you need, I'm there for you. No judgments."

"I know, Grandpa, and I appreciate it." He sighed. "I'm going through a time of change. All those things you mentioned are connected. It all starts in one place ..."

He waited for me to complete his sentence, and I did. "Your mother?"

"Well, of course. I mean, I love her and all that. She's my mother. I'm not one of those people that hates his mother, but sometimes, I find her

insufferable. It's her way or the highway. So I guess I chose the highway."

"So this whole Chabad thing is just an act of rebellion?" I said with some relief. "Just an extreme act to help you break away from her grip?"

He grinned. "You sound relieved. Let me complete that question for you. You are basically asking me if I intend to return to normalcy after I establish my independence."

It was my turn to chuckle. "I suppose. Look, David, I'm ready to support you no matter what you do. And if you need financial support, just ask and it's yours. It's just that ... Chabad? That's uncharted territory."

"I believe you've contributed to some of their campaigns."

"Sure, why not? It was only money. I'm sure they do good things for the Jewish people. But you're my grandson. My only grandchild. I don't know if I'm ready to contribute you to their movement. Not that anyone is asking my permission. Or even opinion."

"I'm not asking your permission, Grandpa, but I wouldn't mind hearing your opinion. I have to admit that my move was a breakaway to a certain extent, but it was really much more than that."

"I'm listening."

"It had something to do with your great-grandfather's *tefillin*, the ones you gave me for my bar-mitzvah."

For those unfamiliar with the term, *tefillin* are small black leather boxes containing tiny parchment scrolls inscribed with biblical passages; they're called phylacteries in English, although that term is probably even more unfamiliar. According to Jewish tradition, you strap on these leather boxes before morning prayers, one onto your head, near your brain, and another onto your left arm, near your heart. And then you pray.

My grandfather, Harry Schneiderman, had his own pair of *tefillin*, and he also had a pair he inherited from his father, Abraham Schneiderman, whose name I carry; my name just morphed into Adrian Taylor. Although not observant, my grandfather feared God, so he gave a lot of money to the Beliatzer Rebbe for his Chassidic institutions. He thought it would buy him

a ticket to Heaven, and who knows? Perhaps it did. He was a good man.

One month before my bar-mitzvah, my grandfather handed me his father's *tefillin* and told me how precious they were. Then he took me to the Beliatzer Rebbe to help me put them on for the first time. Actually, that was a very significant event for me. On that day, I also became a confirmed skeptic. You see, my grandfather told me that the Rebbe was a holy man, that all he had to do was glance at my forehead and he'd see all my sins. I was terrified, but when we met the Rebbe, he gave me a gracious smile and shook my hand warmly. I immediately knew that he hadn't seen a thing. I strapped on the *tefillin* a few times, but then I put them away in a drawer. Until I gave them to David for his bar-mitzvah. Apparently, they had had a weird effect on him.

"My great-grandfather's *tefillin*," I echoed.

"Yeah. When I put them on at my bar-mitzvah, I felt ... something, I don't know, connected to my past? I mean, these were worn by my grandfather's grandfather's father well over a hundred years earlier. That's like ... five generations? Those *tefillin* were carried halfway around the world, from Poland to Germany to the United States, and all so that I, David Goldfield, could wear them on my little head. Pretty cool, don't you think?"

"I suppose."

"And then - and this is really strange - I thought about those little holy scrolls, actually tiny Torah scrolls, and it made me feel special. Even holy? Does that make sense? I can't describe the feeling, but it was way cool."

I was surprised. "Are you saying that you've been putting on *tefillin* since your bar-mitzvah?"

"Nah. I put them on a few times, and then I put them away. I thought I'd save them for my son or grandson, just like you did."

"So what happened?"

"A few months ago, there was a Mitzvah Tank parked just outside the campus. You know what that is?"

"No."

“It’s a Chabad van with religious books and articles inside, usually manned by a couple of Chabad guys who offer them to anyone that looks Jewish. ‘Have you put on *tefillin* today?’ the guy asked me. Actually, I hadn’t put on *tefillin* in years, but what the heck? I let him put the *tefillin* on me, and I read the blessings from a prayer book. You should have heard my Hebrew. It was awful, but I managed to get through it. And you know? It was really nice. It brought back the old feelings I’d almost forgotten.”

“So you decided to join Chabad? Just because of that?”

“No. I passed the same spot the next day, and the Mitzvah Tank was still there. I let the guy put *tefillin* on me again, and we got to talking. His name was Zalman, used to be Sheldon, and he’d been in Chabad for two years. He invited me to Crown Heights for the Sabbath, and I accepted. I guess I wasn’t in such a good place. My mother was driving me crazy, and I wasn’t getting along with my girlfriend; maybe the first led to the second. Or maybe I just don’t understand Korean girls. What should I say? I wasn’t happy. I thought about calling you, but like I said, I needed to work things out on my own.”

“So you went to Crown heights.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I did.”

“And how was it?”

“Great. I met many interesting, intelligent people. We drank vodka, sang old Chabad songs and talked until late at night. They asked me if I’d like to come to a yeshivah in Crown Heights for a while, you know, take a break from school and spend some time studying Jewish traditions and Chabad mysticism, discover who I really was and my purpose in life. Spend some time in 770. Hey, that sounded good, especially the mysticism part; I’d be like the Beatles in India. It wouldn’t cost anything. I could eat and sleep in the yeshivah. So I said okay. I’d try it for a couple of months.”

“And how was it?”

“Great. I’m really enjoying it. I mean, these Lubavitchers live with inspiration. They’re on a mission to establish outposts of Judaism all over

the world, and they're incredible. There are Chabad Houses in just about every corner of the world, about five thousand. Even in Botswana! Just in case Jewish businesspeople pass through there."

"Are they trying to convert the locals?"

"No, they just reach out to Jews."

"And convince them to join Chabad?"

"Not at all. They just want to establish Jewish awareness."

"And how do they measure success?"

"Just by giving Jews a Jewish experience even once in their lifetimes. Like we did in Katmandu. We made a Seder for over two thousand Israelis. A dozen of us flew to Katmandu to help the local Chabad guy. The next day, almost all those people were gone. But we gave them a real Seder. It was extremely satisfying. What effect would that have in the future? Hard to tell. But in the moment, it was a great success. It made me feel good. It made me feel useful."

"What about your girlfriend?"

"That relationship wasn't going anywhere. I told her I needed a break. She didn't seem too upset."

"So are you a Chabad guy? I see that you're kosher. Is that a permanent commitment?"

"Not yet. As long as I'm in Chabad, I feel I should be kosher. But for the time being, I'm still learning and exploring. I don't have to make a decision right away."

"And your mother?"

"She is adamant against my joining Chabad. She won't let me into the house until I leave Chabad. Which just makes me want to stay in Chabad even more."

"I understand. Who knows? Maybe you'll marry a nice Lubavitch girl and give me many religious grandchildren."

He gave me a long look. "Would that be so bad?"

I shook my head. "It would not. You're a smart young man, David. Just

take your time and do what's best for you. Do what will make you happy. You only live once, so you might as well be happy. Anything you need, you know I'm here."

"I know, Grandpa, but I'm fine. My trust fund kicks in next year, so I'll always have the basics. Where do I want to invest my efforts beyond that? I'm not sure yet, but I don't think it'll be about becoming rich."

"Good for you, David. Good for you. Now tell me about Katmandu. I want to hear every detail."

David began by portraying the city, its people, its culture, its streets, its sights and smells. He was like an artist painting the scene for me with his words until I could almost smell the vegetables in the stalls of the markets. He had just begun to describe the tremendous logistical effort that went into preparations for the Seder when my cellphone rang. It was June.

"Adrian! Turn on the television!" she said. "There's news! It's about those militia guys from New Orleans. I'll be out right away."

David and I went into the den to watch the news on the big screen. June joined us a minute later. We spun the channels until we found a program that began at ten o'clock.

"Good evening, we have late breaking news," said the announcer. "Behind us you see the Grand Medallion Hotel outside Youngstown, Ohio, which has been the scene of a political conference this evening. In a statement released to the press, Frederick Farragut, former senator from South Carolina, has announced the formation of a new political party called the American Identity Party. The party was formed by the merger of four militia organizations – the Bunker Hill Brigade, the July Fourth Faction, the Euro-American Alliance and the Waco-Ridge Coalition, which was recently in the news when hundreds of its members demonstrated at Tulane University and nearly caused a riot.

"Senator Farragut declared that the new party will field full slates of candidates for national and statewide offices. He also announced that he will serve as the chairman of the party and that Dr. Sanford Johns, professor

of philosophy at Mazarin University in Little Rock, Arkansas, and founder of the Church of Natural Humanism, will serve as vice chairman. Our own Charles Robinson will interview Dr. Johns for this station tomorrow evening at eleven. The interview will also be posted on our website.

“Reaction in Washington has been guarded. Lawmakers declined to comment until polling data determine the extent of this new party’s support among the general population.”