

Chapter Two

The cab dropped us off at Margaret's house in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn. It was almost nine o'clock. We were sure we'd come in middle of the Seder, if not towards the end, but we couldn't tear ourselves away from the screen for long after the interview was over, switching from channel to channel to catch the reactions of the national media and the politicians.

The media, even Fox News, were outraged, as were most of the politicians. Some of them insisted we should not take the demonstrators seriously. The more we talk about them, the stronger they'd become. One politician suggested that we listen to well-meaning people on both sides. Both sides? Were there two sides? We sat in the cab in silence until our destination. Everything we could have said was said, even though it was unsaid.

The maid opened the door and took our jackets. No one was in the dining room. The settings on the table were untouched. Everyone was clustered around the big screen in the living room. No one was talking.

Margaret saw us first and stood up.

"Good evening, Dad, June," she said sweetly. "Glad you could make it." The words were friendly, but they were not.

We followed her and found seats on a couch. My father waved.

"I was waiting for you, boychik," he said. He likes to use Yiddish dialect. He says it reminds him of his father, but he speaks a very sophisticated English when he wants.

"You really shouldn't have," I said. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"Pah!" He waved my apology away. "Don't be sorry. I didn't really wait for you. You were just the excuse. I wanted to watch that *sheigetz* in

New Orleans. But God waits all year to see us at the Seder. We couldn't keep God waiting, could we? But how could we start the Seder without my eldest son, our own Congressman, the pride of our family?"

I saw Bernie and Alex wince. I guess they don't see me as the pride of our family. Sylvia was oblivious, as usual.

"So we waited for you, Congressman," said my father, "and we watched."

"Former Congressman. Well, that's why we were late. We were watching at home."

"What do you say, former Congressman?" he asked. I don't like it when he calls me that, but if I complain, he'll just do it more. I guess he means no harm. "Are there really tens of thousands of heavily armed roughnecks with heavily tattooed arms out in the wild hills of America? What's your opinion as a Congressman?"

"Not only in the hills, I'm afraid. I don't know if it's hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands. There are too many of them, and they have too many weapons."

He sighed and stood up, taking my hand for support. "It's time to start the Seder. We're late, so we'll have to cut a few corners."

The women lit candles. We drank the four cups of red wine, not all at once, we ate some matzah and read selections from the Passover Haggadah. Twenty-five minutes later, we were ready for dinner.

There is one paragraph in the Haggadah about how the Jewish people face annihilation in every generation and how God always saves us. I suppose that means that he saves the Jewish people as a whole, but as individuals, we're on our own.

My father read the paragraph aloud with great emotion as the family listened transfixed.

"My dear children," he said when he finished the reading, "I'm no spring chicken. Ninety-two years old my last birthday, and I don't know if I'll see another one. I —"

Benny interrupted him. “Aw c’mon, Pop. You still got a lot of mileage left on you.”

“Listen, I know you’re gonna miss me, but get used to it. I’m gonna die. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe a year. Maybe five. So I might as well say my piece now. We’re not safe. We live among our enemies, and we don’t even know who they are. I don’t think there’ll be laws against us, like in Germany, but only because it’d be unconstitutional. The Constitution is holy to the American people. It protects them from each other, and incidentally, it protects us from them. If things look bad, go somewhere else. Don’t worry about your property. Worry about yourselves.”

Alex exchanged glances with his girlfriend. “Don’t you think you’re being a little alarmist, Pop?”

“Not a little. A lot. The alarm is ringing. Listen to it!”

“Is this all about what happened at Tulane? They’re just a bunch of kooks. You shouldn’t take them too seriously.”

“They’re not kooks. They’re haters, and they’re organizing on a large scale. Didn’t you hear the guy? I don’t know if they have thousands of members or only hundreds, but believe me, it’s serious.”

Sylvia took a sip of wine. “I hope you’re wrong, Pop. But thanks for caring.” Edoardo nodded in agreement.

“Where should we go?” said Max, one of Bernie’s boys, his eyes wide with concern. “Should we move to Israel?”

“That’s not very safe either, honey. No one’s going anywhere now. I’m just telling your parents to keep their eyes open.”

Beatrice was sitting next to Max. She took his hand and patted it, then she whispered in his ear and kissed him.

“You’re scaring Max, Grandpa,” she said. “Did you have to do this in front of him on Passover night?”

“A little fright doesn’t hurt, but enough of this. Let’s eat!”

I didn’t get involved in the conversation, but I understood my father’s concern. He was a refugee. My grandfather, Harry Schneiderman, was born

in Galicia, Poland, in 1895. His family fled to Germany during the First World War and settled in Berlin. He married my grandmother, Malka Kagan, who was also a refugee, and they opened a shoe store. My father was born in 1928. The store prospered. Life was good.

When the Nazis became a factor with their rallies, marches and violent rhetoric, my grandparents bought diamonds and made sure all the passports were in order, but they kept their store open. When the Nazis came to power, my grandparents still hoped for the best, but the situation for the Jews deteriorated from day to day. My father was beaten up in school when he was seven years old, and then he was prevented from going to school altogether. My grandfather put extra locks on the doors, and he applied for visas for the United States. The shoe store was destroyed in 1938 during Kristallnacht, and two months later, the family was in New York; had they stayed longer, they probably would have been deported and murdered.

Whether or not my father was right to be concerned, I understood him completely. Maybe it was not quite *déjà vu*, but it was deeply disturbing nonetheless. For me as well.