

Chapter Eleven

On Sunday, the family got together for a barbecue at my brother Bernie's house in Passaic, New Jersey, to celebrate my father's ninety-third birthday. June called David to invite him to come with us. She promised to bring food he could eat in addition to fruit and soft drinks. He might not have attended if June had not invited him to come with us. But he agreed to come. It made me happy.

David took the subway from Crown Heights and knocked on our door before noon. He looked distracted. I asked him if everything was all right, and he assured me that it was. Still, I could see he was holding something back. Then I realized that this birthday party would be the first occasion Margaret and David attended together since she had expelled him from his home. Undoubtedly, David was concerned about meeting his mother. It would be awkward, to say the least.

Bernie lived in a large suburban mansion that stood on a full acre. The lawn was beautifully landscaped. The entire house was fronted with flower beds bursting with a dazzling display of vivid color and numerous Japanese maples. The branches of the oaks and the elms were heavy with verdant foliage. A marble fountain gurgled in the summer heat.

The rest of the family was already there when we arrived. We could hear the sounds of music and conversation from the patio as we headed around back, and as we drew closer, we smelled the roasting meat. I glanced at David to see his reaction. He gave me a crooked grin and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say that he did not expect his great uncle to make his home kosher to accommodate him.

Bernie greeted us with a broad smile. He slapped me on the back, shook David's hand and nodded at June. He led us onto the patio. The smell of

roasting meat was overpowering. The children were playing in the kidney-shaped pool, and groups of friends and family were conversing on the patio near my father. He was sitting at a table under an umbrella. He had a beer in one hand and a hot dog in the other. The piano melodies of Lang Lang played in the background.

I bent over him and kissed his cheek. “Well, how’s the birthday boy? It looks like you made it to another birthday. We were worried on Passover.”

“Nah, I didn’t think I’d die before my next birthday, but a person never knows. One day, you’re here, and the next day you wake up and discover that you’re dead. And how are you doing, boychik? You see, I didn’t call you Congressman. I just thought it.” He chuckled. Then he put back his serious face. “You’ve been making some noise in the news lately. Listen, you did the right thing.”

“Thank you for seeing that.”

“You know, of course, that there’s going to be trouble, especially on the Fourth of July. Well, don’t worry about it. You’re not responsible. The American Identity Party is determined to make a lot of noise. If not Hesterville, it would have been somewhere else. You did right to stand up to them. It’s your job to protect the Constitutional rights of your clients, and you did that very well. Leave the rest to God.”

“You sound like Grandpa Harry. Since when do you talk about God?”

“You’re right. My father was kind of religious. He kept kosher in the house. I don’t know if it would have been kosher enough for David, but he did the best he could. He went to shul every week. He even closed his store on Saturday morning. He was terrified of God, and he did his best to appease Him.”

“And you’re not terrified of God?”

“Nah. Why would he want to hurt me? Did I ever hurt anyone?”

“I guess not. You’re safe, Pop.”

“I’m safe from God but not from those AIP crazies. Don’t forget what I said on Passover. Watch your back.”

June came over with David. She kissed my father, wished him a happy birthday and went to get some food.

“Come here, boychik’l,” my father said to David. “Give your great grandfather a hug. We missed you on Passover.”

“Happy birthday,” said David. “I missed you, too, but I was away.”

“I know. In Nepal. Your grandfather told me. Did you like it?”

“I enjoyed what I was doing.”

“Making a Seder for all those Israeli backpackers. That was nice. Did you get a chance to climb Mount Everest?”

David smiled. “Not this time. Maybe next.”

June came back with a plate of ribs and offered me some. I shook my head. “I think I’ll share David’s food, if he can spare some.”

“Aw c’mon, Grandpa,” he said. “You don’t have to do that. You love ribs, and those look really good. Why should you deprive yourself?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I really didn’t know. I had just said it on impulse. “Maybe it’s just a way of showing you how much I love you.”

“Well, I love you, too, David,” said June, “but I’m going to eat these ribs anyway.”

Just then, Margaret came out of the house. She sat down next to us.

“Hello, Dad,” she said. “Hello, June.” She looked at her son. “David.”

“Hello, Mother. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m just fine. We miss you, David. Your room is ready, and your bed is made. You can come home anytime you choose.”

“With no conditions?”

“Just one. Be normal.”

“I think I am normal.”

“Well, that’s a matter of opinion. I hear you live in Crown Heights.”

“How do you know? Did Grandpa tell you?”

“I did not,” I interjected. “In fact, I haven’t spoken to your mother since Passover. I’ve been busy.”

“So have I,” Margaret said with a toss of her head. “You and your

precious grandfather are famous. I read all about both of you in the news.”

She stood up. “I have to go take care of something. Catch you later.”

No one spoke for a little while. My father broke the silence.

“Well, that wasn’t too painful, David. I was expecting a scene.”

“Believe me,” he said, “it was painful. But what can you do?”

“Exactly. What can you do? You know what you can do? Nothing! So be happy and do what you want.”

David and I took our food to a small table near the back fence of the property, far from the noise and smells. David offered to get me some ribs, but I refused. I enjoyed showing him solidarity and love more than I would have enjoyed the ribs. I could always take June out for ribs tomorrow.

“What’s on your mind, David,” I said. “You’re holding something back.”

“True.”

“Do you want to tell me? You don’t have to, you know.”

“No, I very much want to tell you. I was just waiting for a good opportunity. I didn’t want to talk in front of June. Maybe now is a good time.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“You know about the July Fourth demonstration in Hesterville?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Lots of people are going to be there for the other side. You know, to demonstrate against them. There are bound to be hundreds of Jewish college students among them, almost all of them non-observant. We were talking about it in Crown Heights. The rabbis were saying that this would be a great opportunity to reach out to these kids and give them a taste of Judaism.”

“How’s that?”

“You know, by helping them put on *tefillin* or giving them candles for the Sabbath. Many of them have never had such an experience.”

I was skeptical. “Sounds dangerous. Why don’t the rabbis just do this on

college campuses?”

“They do. But they figured that when Jewish kids come to demonstrate against the AIP, they’ll be more receptive to their ancient heritage.”

“You mean, if you persecute me for being Jewish, I might as well learn something about Judaism?”

“Something like that.”

“How do they propose to do this? Just flag down people in the street?”

“No, they’ll bring a Mitzvah Tank from Crown Heights to Hesterville and park it in front of the Chabad House. They’ll offer food and cold drinks, and they’ll offer *tefillin* and candles. And literature for those who are interested.”

“And you want to go there?” I knew the dreaded answer, but I asked anyway.

“I volunteered. I told them I was familiar with Hesterville, that I knew my way around. They accepted my offer. I’m looking forward to being there on the Fourth of July. I’m excited.”

“I’m against it,” I said. “If you’re asking my advice or approval, I’m against it. It’s too risky.”

“It would mean a lot to me if you supported me. I believe I’ll be doing something important, something really meaningful. Be happy for me.”

“I still think it’s much too risky,” I insisted.

“People take risks to do meaningful things. What about Doctors Without Borders? But I’m telling you that it won’t be risky. We won’t be anywhere near the Municipal Building. The demonstration is three blocks away. We’ll meet people on the way to the demonstration and on the way back. Don’t worry, we’ll be safe.”

“No one in Hesterville will be safe.”