

Chapter Seventeen

The dreaded moment had come. Margaret sat down without a word. She was seething. Gerald came in a minute later and sat down beside her. He nodded to me, then he studied his shoes. I wondered who would be the first to break the deadly silence. Of one thing I was sure. It wouldn't be me. I didn't think it would be Gerald either.

"It's all your fault," said Margaret. "My baby is in there fighting for his life. My only child! And it's all your fault."

"Oh, really? How is it my fault? I tried to stop him. June tried to stop him. But he wouldn't listen."

"You mean he told you he was coming?"

"He did."

"When?"

"At Pop's birthday party."

"You knew all along, and you didn't tell me! Didn't you think I should know? I'm his mother, for crying out loud! What kind of a father are you? What kind of a grandfather?"

"Do you think he would have listened to you if you'd told him not to go? Don't forget that you're the one who threw him out of the house when he didn't leave Chabad. Did he listen to you then?"

"You should have told me! I blame you!"

"Really? Really?" I was furious with her for blaming me even though I knew I was not to blame. Perhaps I should have restrained myself. Perhaps I should have given her some slack considering that she was his mother after all. But her unfair and unreasonable accusation hurt me so deeply that I just wanted to retaliate. "Maybe you're the one that's to blame, Margaret. Did that ever occur to you? If you had let him live at home and keep kosher in

his room, he wouldn't have gotten so involved with Crown Heights. He would have been Chabad from a distance. He would never have volunteered to go to Hesterville."

She stared at me with horror. "So now it's my fault?" she snarled. "You just can't accept responsibility, can you? You never could." I didn't know what she meant by that last remark, but she didn't give me time to think about it. "Let's forget about telling him not to go. I'll admit that, considering where he was, he would not have listened to you and not to me either. But why was he there in the first place? Why was he in Hesterville?"

"What do you mean? Did you think I told him to go? He volunteered!"

"I know why they sent him. I heard it on the radio on the way here. They would have sent only Lubavitchers experienced in outreach, and he did not exactly qualify for that. But they accepted him anyway, because he convinced them he was familiar with Hesterville. Why was he familiar? Because his grandfather, the famous Adrian Taylor, took him there to the meeting with the township committee. I heard it on the radio."

"That's ridiculous," I fumed. "I took him with me, because I wanted him to get some experience with lawsuits. I was hoping he'd go back to college even if he stayed with Chabad. I could not have known that he'd volunteer to man a Mitzvah Tank near a riot."

"We all saw what happened at Tulane. We all heard about the American Identity Party. Did you think they'd stand by while people waved Israeli and Mexican flags on the Fourth of July? You must've known that you were opening a can of worms!"

"So you're saying that I shouldn't have taken the case when my clients were being denied their right to free speech?"

"You could do whatever you damn well wanted to do, but you didn't have to drag David into it."

This was getting crazier and crazier. I realized I was dealing with an irrational, hysterical mother. She had to blame someone, because she couldn't bear to face up to her own culpability. Nonetheless, I couldn't let

her accusations pass. I was about to respond that she had driven David into the arms of Chabad by her domineering mothering, but just then, June came back. Rabbi Gutmacher was with her. Both were holding bags.

“This is Rabbi Gutmacher,” said June. “I met the rabbi downstairs. He said that David is his student.”

“He is,” I said. “Thank you for coming, Rabbi Gutmacher.”

“I came as soon as I heard,” said the rabbi. “I brought sandwiches and fruit. It won’t do David any good if we faint from hunger.”

“And I brought snacks and drinks,” said June.

“Great!” said Margaret. “Let’s have a picnic while my son is dying!”

“Margaret, dear,” said Gerald, “Maybe you should have something to eat. You’ll feel better.” It was the first thing he had said since he came.

Margaret was about to say something, but then she changed her mind. She took a sandwich from the rabbi’s bag and a bottle of water from June’s. All of us followed suit, and we ate in silence. I was grateful for the few minutes of peace. I was also grateful for the interruption before I hurled my latest accusation at Margaret. It would have been a mistake; there was nothing to be gained.

Night was falling, and still we heard nothing from the operating room. I wondered if that was a good sign, but I said nothing. Rabbi Gutmacher was reciting Psalms. Gerald was on his cell phone for want of anything better to do. I couldn’t tell if he was reading messages, consuming news or playing games, but I could see that his eyes were glazed and that his mind was somewhere else. June was reading a magazine. Margaret and I were watching the news without speaking to or looking at each other.

After about five hours of waiting, the nurse appeared again. “I know you’re all anxious,” she said, “so I came to tell you that David is still in surgery. The doctors have managed to stabilize him, but there are some complications. Say some prayers. I’ll be back as soon as I have anything more to report.”

“What does that mean?” Gerald asked June in a shaky voice. “You’re a

doctor. Please explain that to me. Be honest. Please.”

“I’m a dermatologist, Gerald,” she replied. “I haven’t dealt with traumatic injury since my residency days. But I’d guess that they hooked him up to a heart-lung machine and stopped the internal bleeding. They’re trying to repair the damage to his organs, and maybe it’s not going as well as they would like.”

“What are you saying, June?” breathed Margaret. “Tell me the truth!”

“I’m saying that we should hope for the best but be prepared for the worst. I’m so sorry.”

“You should be. You’re also responsible for this.”

“Adrian and I were by David’s side less than a minute after the attack. We may have saved his life.”

“I’ll thank you if he lives,” said Margaret and burst into tears.

Another hour of tense silence passed by. We all kept looking at the door, but the nurse did not return. I told myself that it was a good sign.

Rabbi Gutmacher cleared his throat.

“May I bring up an unpleasant subject?” he said. No one objected so he plunged ahead. “Dr. Taylor is right. We should hope for the best but prepare for the worst. If the worst happens, Heaven forbid, the family should already know what has to be done. I’ll get straight to the point. If David passes away without recovering consciousness, Heaven forbid, I think we should honor his wishes even if he doesn’t get a chance to express them himself. As the parents, Mr. and Mrs. Goldfield, do you agree?”

Gerald nodded. “Of course, we should do whatever he would have wanted to do. I think that’s only right.”

“And you, Mrs. Goldfield?”

Margaret’s hair was disheveled, her makeup was smeared, and her cheeks were stained with her tears. Comprehension dawned in her reddened eyes. She threw back her shoulders in defiance and glared at him.

“Oh no, no,” she said and wagged her finger at the rabbi. “No, no, no. A hundred times no. Don’t even think about it. You are not involved in this.

I'm his mother, and I've made my decision. He'll be cremated, and his ashes will be buried in the family plot. You took him from me in life, and now you want to take him from me in death? No!"

"Think about you son, Mrs. Goldfield," said the rabbi. "If he were to regain consciousness for a short while and realize that his time was limited to minutes or hours, what would he say? Would he want to have his funeral according to Jewish tradition? Or would he want to be cremated? What's more, do you think he'd ask to be buried in Montefiore Cemetery near the mausoleum in which the last two Lubavitcher Rebbes were laid to rest?"

The rabbi was right. David would want a traditional Jewish burial and internment. Even though he'd been in Chabad for less than a year, he'd given his life for Chabad ideals, and Chabad had given him inspiration and fulfillment until his last breath. He'd want a Chabad funeral, and he'd want to be connected forever by being buried in the hallowed ground near the Lubavitcher Rebbes. But I was sure Margaret wouldn't hear of it.

"I appreciate your concern, rabbi," she said. "Perhaps you should have shown your concern by advising him not to go to Hesterville."

"He didn't ask me. And if he did, I don't know what I would've told him. I'm sorry you blame me, Mrs. Goldfield, but now is not the time for blame. It's the time for decisions."

"And I've made my decision. He'll be cremated, and his ashes ..." She burst into tears. "My God, his ashes! I can't believe what we're saying! But if my baby doesn't survive, his ashes will be buried in the family plot in New Jersey. Do you agree, Gerald?"

Gerald clearly did not agree, but he could not contend with his wife in her fury. His shoulders slumped, and he shrugged. That was the most spousal defiance in his capability.

"Then that's settled," said Margaret.

"I ask you to reconsider, Mrs. Goldfield," said the rabbi. "It is a great mitzvah to honor the wishes of the ... his wishes. What do you honestly think David would have wanted?"

“You want him to defy me in death? Is that what you want? It’s not enough that you lured him away from me during his lifetime. Do you want to keep him apart from me forever?”

“This is not about you, Mrs. Goldfield. It’s about David. It’s about honoring his wishes. I’m pleading with you. For the sake of David’s eternal soul, let him have what he would have wanted.”

“I’m his mother! I’ll decide what he would have wanted. I don’t want to hear anymore.”

The rabbi sat down in glum defeat. He buried his eyes in his book and continued to recite Psalms. Margaret was triumphant, but she knew perfectly well that it was not important to David to be buried next to Harry and Ruth Schneiderman, his great-great-grandparents. There was no doubt about what he would have wanted. And yet, she insisted on standing in his way. Why was she doing it? Was it to gain a victory over David that she couldn’t gain during his lifetime? I had to stop her. I had to do it for David. I would never again be able to do anything for David, but I could stand up for him now.

“Margaret, let’s talk a little more,” I said.

“Aha, you’re on the rabbi’s side. Of course. I should have known. I bet you were happy when David moved out of the house and went to live in Crown Heights, weren’t you? The sweet taste of revenge. Maybe you even put him up to it. And now, you want him buried in Crown Heights, and your revenge will be complete. Separation forever.”

“Margaret, you’re hysterical. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly, and let’s have a calm conversation. Is that okay?”

“What if I don’t want to have any more conversations?”

“I’m his grandfather, and I loved him with all my heart. I have some say in the matter. Put your anger and fury aside. Think about your love for your wonderful son. Let’s talk.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Then I’m going to talk to Gerald.”

“Gerald and I are one. He’s not going to side with you against me.”

“Then we’ll leave Gerald out of this. You talk to me.”

“I don’t want to talk anymore. I’m exhausted. You’re a bunch of ghouls talking about burying a boy who’s still alive. In any case, I’m his mother, and I’ve made my decision. It won’t change.”

“Let me point out, Margaret, that David is not a minor over whom you have control. He is an adult. Your position as his mother and closest kin is to give an honest evaluation of what his wishes would have been. Your decision is to suit yourself, not to honor David’s wishes.”

“You’re accusing me of dishonesty.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just saying that you’re being overly emotional. It’s understandable, of course. But think with your head and with the love in your heart. You must let David have his wishes. He’s at your mercy right now. Don’t take advantage of it.”

“I’m doing the right thing. He never should have gone to Chabad. I’m going to bring him home where he belongs.”

I sighed. I had tried my best. Now, I would have to take a different approach. “I won’t let you do it, Margaret. It would be unconscionable. I’m sorry, Margaret, but I’m going to have to fight you on this. For David, whom we love.”

“And how are you going to stop me? I’m his mother! I have legal standing, not you.”

“I’m going to get an injunction. I have enough connections, and I can get it within hours. Then we’ll have a hearing before a judge. We’ll let the judge decide what David would have wanted. I’ll bring witnesses to the life he’d chosen for himself. I’ll tell the judge that you threw him out of the house. June and I’ll testify to his state of mind during his last hours. I’ll tell him that David gave his life for a mission in which he believed strongly. What do you think he’ll say? What do you think the press will say?”

She blanched. “You wouldn’t dare! You would humiliate me like that?”

“I would. You know I would. This is the last thing I can do for David,

and I will do it to the best of my ability.”

“And Margaret be damned!” she yelled.

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Margaret. It doesn’t have to be a war. Be completely honest and unemotional for a moment. What is the objective truth? What would an objective judge say?”

“You’re an evil man, Dad. The great Adrian Taylor is nothing more than a snake in the grass!”

I did not respond, and she fell silent for a long minute.

“All right,” she whispered. “For David.”

We sat in silence, all eyes fixed on the door. I took no pleasure in my victory over Margaret. At least, I convinced myself I didn’t. I knew she’d never forgive me. I was paying a high price, but I couldn’t let David be buried anywhere other than where he would have wanted. I owed it to him.

It was close to midnight when the door finally opened. This time it was the doctor. One look at his exhausted face told the entire story. Margaret shrieked and covered her face with her hands. Her body shook with heartrending sobs. Gerald put his arm around her shoulders and whispered to her.

As for me, what can I say? I had never experienced such sorrow in my entire life. I didn’t cry, but I felt as if my chest was clenched in an iron fist. I couldn’t breathe. I felt as if my heart would stop beating. June led me to a chair and gave a bottle of water.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Mr. and Mrs. Goldfield, Congressman, Dr. Taylor,” the doctor said. “We did everything humanly possible, but the shrapnel had caused too much damage. We lost him. I’m so sorry.”

The doctor slipped out of the room, and Rabbi Gutmacher took out his cell phone.

“I’m going to call the burial society. They’ll be here in an hour.”